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Dick Darling, THE PONY EXPRESS RIDER.

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ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAIL STATION.

A LOW adobe* hut, with about the same amount of comfort that exists in an ordinary stable in New York; a large corral behind it, in which some twenty wiry little mustangs were playing about; a stockade near the hut and opening into the corral; a stone granary within the stockade, loop-holed and iron-ported; two men lounging in the sun in front of the hut, one smoking, another cleaning his revolvers; behold the appearance of Dolores Station, Pony Express Route, in Nevada Territory, some twenty years ago.

The two men were widely different in external appearance and seemed to be so in character, judging from many indications. The smoker was a short, broad, heavy-built man, of about forty, whose shaggy hair and beard looked as if the comb and they were distant acquaintances, that seldom met. The light-blue uniform in which he was dressed was dirty and careless, the jacket unbuttoned, disclosing a shirt, once red, now a dingy purple, the trowsers ragged in the seat and inside of the thigh to the knee, as if from riding, while the huge boots were brown and rusty. The little briarwood pipe was stuck at one side of a grim, determined mouth, and the face of the smoker was that of a rough, reckless frontiersman.

The second man was younger, taller and slighter, as well as incomparably neater and handsomer. He did not seem to be over twenty, for his face was nearly smooth, a soft brown mustache barely shading his upper lip. He wore his curling chestnut hair long and flowing, under the neat, dark-blue chasseur cap, which bore in old English letters, on the front, the mysterious initials J. S. P. E. inclosed in a silver horse-shoe. The difference between his uniform and that of his comrade was amazing. By the mere fact of its being cut

and fitting well, and being buttoned up, while the riding-boots of patent-leather were kept oiled and shining, it gave him the appearance of a different being. The two revolvers that he was cleaning were already as bright as silver, and yet he continued polishing them with a piece of chamois-leather.

Presently his companion removed the pipe from his mouth, and growled out:

"Say, Dick, what'n thunder's the use of cleanin' up them things? They don't shoot a bit straighter fur't, and the company don't 'low fur't. I wouldn't waste my time, a-polishin' up them darned old pops."

The youngster addressed as "Dick," smiled.

"I don't know that I waste any more time on them than you do on smoke, Jack, and if they don't shoot any straighter, at least they don't do any worse for a cleaning."

"But what's the use o' livin', ef a cuss has to be a-cleanin' of himself all the time?" objected

Jack, with a huge yawn. "I sw'ar ef it warn't fur my pipe, I wouldn't be worth a Continental these times. Put the pistols away and hev a sociable draw, you finikin' young galoot."

Dick Darling gave his revolvers a final rub, and then placed them in the patent-leather holsters, on each side of a neat belt, that lay on the end of the bench on which he was sitting.

As carefully and methodically as he did every thing else, he put away the belt in the cabin, and returned, holding a large and handsome meerschaum pipe in his hand, which he slowly and carefully filled from a neat little pouch.

Jack Hardin grinned somewhat contemptuously.

"What a luxuriant cuss you air, Dick. Kurn't be content with any thing but a meerschaum, out in the Alkali Desert. Durned ef I don't believe you'll be hev'n silver spoons out hyar, some day."

"I certainly shall when I get enough spare cash, Jack," said Darling, tranquilly lighting

his pipe. "What's the use of sinkin' to the level of a beast, because we seldom see any thing but horses? I believe, in civilization myself, and you know, Jack, we're pioneers of civilization out here."

"Civilization be durned!" cried Hardin, with a grimace. "We're out hyar to kerry the mails and keep off Injuns from Uncle Sam's stock, that's what we're hyar for. I'd like to see a Ute brave go fur your skulps some morning! Guess he'd shake the civilization outen you in short order, and spell bounce in darned big capitals. You'll wish you hadn't wasted so much time a-combin' that ha'r of yours just about them times, I reckon."

Dick Darling laughed good-naturedly. He seemed not at all hurt by his companion's rough pleasantries, as he said:

"I'll admit that such a predicament might be disagreeable, Jack, but I fancy I should get through it, somehow."

Hardin growled. "Yes, somehow. That's what's the matter. Boy, you don't know what it is to hug a grizzly, or meet a red on the war-path. Ef you'd drop that 'ere cleanin' up and take to shootin', mout hev hopes on yer. As it is, every time yer go out, I never 'spec' to see yer ag'in."

"Every man to his taste, Jack. I've come back safe, several times. Come, you want to be shooting all the time. What say you to a match?"

"Shoot yer all day at a dollar a shot," said Hardin, eagerly. "Let's git up an excitement. The mail



*Adobe. Sun-dried brick, the common material for houses in the climates of California, Mexico, Nevada, etc.

won't be up fur an hour yet, and it's your turn."

"Done!" said Darling, quietly. "I must warn you that I've been practicing lately, Jack."

"You 'in practice all you' like," said Jack Hardin, a little scornfully. "I'm from Kentuck, pardner, whar they lams the little boys, ef they don't hit a squirrel in the eye, every time."

As he spoke he stalked into the little hut, where the opposite sides were as strongly contrasted as their respective owners. Darling's bed was neatly made, and raised on a framework of slender poles, his horse equipments hung on a stand, all his various garments and accouterments on pegs, while a looking-glass hung on the wall. The Kentuckian's bed was on the floor, and while every thing was in order for instant use, the dirt was carelessly brushed off every thing.

Jack Hardin picked up his belt and pistols, and left the hut. Dick Darling put away his pipe with a scrupulous care, and buckled his belt tightly around him, before he followed.

Hardin inserted a broad silver dollar in the cleft of a thin stick, threw the stick as far as it would go, and then remarked:

"Stick it up thar, youngster. That's fur enough fur you. I'll stand byar."

Dick Darling smiled and obeyed. He found the wand, with the dollar still in the cleft, some hundred feet away, where he stuck it into the ground, leaving the dollar edgewise to Hardin, then walked back, remarking, quietly:

"Any fool can see a dollar, full face. Let's see you knock it out that way, Kentuck."

Jack Hardin's face became grave at once. The feat demanded of him required the powers of a first-class marksman.

"Wal, Dick," he said, dryly, "I'll not deny that ef you kin hit that ar' dollar, that ar' way, you hev improved; but old Kentuck ain't so easy beat, arter all. Stand cl'ar."

Raising his pistol, he took a steady and deliberate aim, and fired. The white stick was seen to tremble, but remained standing. It was only grazed.

Hardin uttered a disappointed oath, then turned to Darling.

"Take a shot, young feller," he said, curtly. "The smoke of this durned pipe got in my eyes dat time, but you kurn't beat it, anyway."

Without a word Dick Darling fired.

The stick fell, and the dollar was sent flying in the air.

CHAPTER II.

TWO CURIOUS GIRLS.

MR. JOHN HARDIN removed the pipe from his mouth, and gazed on Dick Darling with an air of new-born respect, for nearly half a minute, without speaking. Then he dived into his trousers pocket, and extracted a large silver dollar therefrom, which he extended to Dick, observing:

"Fa'r play's a jewel, pard. You've won her. Thar she is. Two to one you kurn't do it ag'in, hand runnin'."

Dick was about to answer, when the low rumbling thunder of horses at a gallop struck on their senses, and Hardin started.

"By the ghost of General Jackson, pard, thar's them gals a-comin' ag'in. Put up yer iron. You hev me this time, but I'll git squar' next match, and leave this durned pipe behind. I didn't think ye he'd t in yer."

While he spoke, he was hurriedly loading the discharged chamber of his pistol, and Darling, with his usual neat habits, was wiping out the barrel of his own weapon with the wiping-stick.

The sound of galloping horses came plainer and plainer on the ear, and two equestrians were to be seen approaching the station, from the direction of Humboldt Pass.

Dolores Station was on the Pony Express route, at the edge of the gloomy and cheerless Alkali Desert, in one of the fertile valleys that intersect that part of Nevada, among the peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Snowy summits reared their giant heads in the distance on all sides, and frowned protectingly over the green vales, along which the Hastings road ran from Salt Lake City to Carson.

A branch road forked off at Hastings Pass to Provo, and along both these routes the Pony Express men galloped from station to station, at the full speed of their game little horses.

These stations were the only habitations, save the low brush huts of the Utes, for hundreds of miles, till you came to the old Mission of Santa Clara, where two convents, one of nuns, another of monks, stood in holy rivalry, within a mile of each other.

The equestrians coming toward Dolores Station were not of the civilized order. So much was clear. But whether warriors or squaws was not so clear till a nearer view.

Both rode handsome little mustangs, of that beautifully variegated color on account of which the frontiersmen denominate them "paint horses," which are generally appropriated to chiefs. Both rode in manly style, bestriding their steeds with ease and grace worthy of a riding-master, and both were fully equipped as warriors. Still, there was something in the dress of both, feminine in its character, and a near approach revealed the two riders to be women.

Women they were, or rather girls, handsome in face, supple in figure, not yet disfigured by the labors, which turn squaws, at thirty years, into wrinkled hags. From the fairness of their complexions and the cast of their features, it was evident that they were not full-blooded Indians, but crossed on some Caucasian stock. The texture and material of their dresses, and the fact of their carrying firearms of handsome make, also proclaimed them to be connected with white men, either the wives or daughters of some mountain man, whose traps and rifle were "lucky."

As they came up, it was hard to tell them apart. They seemed to be twins, so closely did they resemble each other. Both had great black eyes, high, hawklike profiles, straight, glistening black hair, rounded chins, and full, sensuous lips, like Egyptian queens.

It was in very fair English, with a strong French accent, that one of them said, as they pulled up:

"Good-morning, Darling. How is my Darling?"

Dick Darling flushed up at this address, for he was a modest youth, with all his good looks.

"Very well, thank you, Mademoiselle Chevrete," he said, in a low voice. "How do you find yourself?"

Before answering, the girl sprung off her horse with the lightness of a bird, and stood before the youth, a model for Diana in bronze.

"Eh bien, Levrette and I are always well. We were out hunting, and thought we would come your way, Darling. Cat's Eye is on the war-path near your trail. Look to yourselves, you and Blackbeard."

Jack Hardin started.

"Look here, Chevrete, this ain't no time fur foolin' a feller. How do you know that cuss is on the war-path? Is it against us?"

"Oh, no," laughed the half-breed beauty carelessly. "He has too much good sense for that. No. He's out against us!"

And both girls laughed scornfully.

Dick Darling looked puzzled.

"Tell me, Levrette," he said. "You're the quietest of the two. What does she mean?"

Levrette, the second sister, answered more soberly:

"She means that Cat's Eye and Crow's Foot came after us yesterday, and asked us to enter their lodges; that we refused; and that they swore to follow us till they captured us and made us marry them."

Dick frowned.

"The insolent dogs. What did you say?"

"I said," replied Chevrete, with flashing eyes, "that my father was a white man, my mother a queen of the Echipeta, and that if a dog of the Blackfeet bit the hand of a Ute brave, he sickened at the taste. I told him to do his best, and fear my revolvers."

"Good fer yer grit," said Hardin, with emphasis. "I want to see the red sneak round byar, that's all. Ef he meddles with this child, he'll swaller lead mighty suddint."

Here the second girl, who was called Levrette, slowly swung herself off her horse, with a lazy grace, strikingly in contrast with the active motions of her twin sister, from whom, otherwise, she was hardly to be distinguished.

"Well," she said, with the same freedom of speech and manner which was assumed by Chevrete, "and have you no welcome for us, Darling, when we come to see you? I believe that rough old Blackbeard, here, is more polite."

Dick Darling stammered and blushed, as he offered the hospitality of his cabin. Jack Hardin, on the other hand, grinned with the utmost affability, and ushered the girls into the low hut as if it had been a palace.

"Walk in, ladies," he said. "Tain't often we gets a visit from anything but coyotes out byar. Walk in and make yourselves to hum."

A moment later the two girls were in the hut, and we grieve to say that the fair Chevrete deliberately pulled out a very large cigar, lighted

it at the fire, and commenced smoking, in concert with her sister.

These two half-Indian girls were curious characters.

Their father, Jean Baptiste Ledoux, had been a fur-trader and Indian-agent of some wealth, who had married an Indian wife, as was the custom of those times. His daughters, whom he had whimsically named Chevrete and Levrette (Fawn and Leveret), had received, first, some education at a Canadian convent, then a second one on the prairies. Levrette could play a polka on the piano, talk French, English, and a dozen Indian dialects, ride a mustang, shoot bow, rifle and revolver, and fling a lasso. Chevrete could do all these better than her sister, and was quite a rapid draughtsman also.

Their father, dying when they were at his trading-post, left them all his wealth, and his wishes that they would go to Montreal to live; but the wild blood of the Indian mother was too firmly rooted in freedom to submit to this.

Eagle's Wing, head Medicine Chief of the Echipeta, had offered to adopt them into the tribe, and the girls had eagerly accepted the offer.

Their wealth made them favorites; they were generous and free; the Indians gave them all the liberty of young warriors; and they were happy, to all seeming.

It was only when Dick Darling began to ride on the Salt Lake trail that trouble rose.

Both girls fell in love with the handsome youngster, and did not scruple to tell him so. Had he been a man of maturity, they would, perhaps, have been more modest. As it was, both actually besieged the bashful boy all the time, while a score of Blackfoot and Ute braves were equally persistent after Levrette and Chevrete.

It was under these circumstances that our heroines enter the scene.

CHAPTER III.

GOING FOR THE PRIZE.

LATE in that same day, two men were slowly creeping toward Dolores Station, carefully hiding themselves behind every rock and bush, and yet advancing nearer all the while, unseen from the station.

Both were Indians, and armed with rifles, which they trailed after them in the grass as they advanced. Each carried in his belt, moreover, a large revolver, rusty and grimy, but serviceable.

Pretty soon they had arrived at a group of bowlders, beyond which the land was open to the station, and afforded no further concealment. Then both halted and crouched behind the rocks to watch, with the stoic patience of the Indian warrior.

These men were true western Indians, of that half Mongol type which is so grim and repulsive. Their faces were broad and square, with high cheek-bones, small eyes, heavy, sensual jaws and low, broad foreheads. The streak of paint on their features told that they were on the war-path, and their army clothes, dirty and begrimed, announced them as "Reservation Indians," whom Uncle Sam feeds and clothes, through the medium of thieving agents, till some robbery of the latter drives them to retaliation and all the wild excesses of a savage nature.

Around the station all was quiet and peaceful. The warm afternoon sun shone on the low hut, the stockade inclosure, the lazy mustangs who were dozing in their straw yard, and on the two brightly-spotted chargers that stood before the door, covered with gay housings.

Sitting on the bench before the door was a group of four persons, the sight of which seemed to incite the Indians to frenzy, for their eyes began to glare, and the nervous clutch with which they began to handle their rifles portended mischief.

The four persons were Jack Hardin and Chevrete Ledoux, and Dick Darling and Levrette, a very graceful, picturesque group in attitude and surroundings. The blue uniforms of the men, and the bright scarlet skirts of the two girls, with the mingling of civilization and savagery in their costumes, made a very attractive picture for an artist, but the two Indians did not appear to admire it.

One of them turned and whispered to the other.

"Let us fire, Cat's Eye. 'Tis a fair shot. We can each take one, and rush for the girls."

Cat's Eye was a cunning looking rascal, with very narrow eyes, whence his name. He laid his hand on the other's arm.

"Let Crow's Foot listen," he whispered. "The men must die, the squaws must be ours. Is it not so?"

Crow's Foot nodded, with his eyes still fixed on the couples on the bench.

"If we shoot the men, the squaws may shoot us, or ride away," pursued Cat's Eye. "We have no horses here."

"We can take those," objected his comrade, pointing to the corral.

"We shall be known, if we take them here. The soldiers may come by, and trail us, and then they kill warriors with the rope."

Crow's Foot gave an uneasy shrug. An Indian dreads the idea of being hung, worse than anything.

"Let Crow's Foot listen," pursued the wily Cat's Eye. "When the two white men ride on the trail to Carson, they pass many places fit for an ambush. Let us rouse the Ute braves, lie in wait for them, and slay them in the mountains."

Crow's Foot said nothing. He only looked at the girls, and trembled with spite and jealousy. Cat's Eye continued, cunningly:

"Then we can catch the squaws, shake the warriors' scalps in their faces, and take them into our lodges, like great chiefs."

Crow's Foot listened to the last words with attention.

Presently he whispered.

"We can do better than that. First let us shoot the men, then rush out and seize girls and horses in the confusion. We can do it and flee to the Apaches. Who can find us there?"

"Cat's Eye was about to answer, when both started and listened.

At the same moment the two Indian girls started up, and seemed to be pointing to the east. The keen senses of all four had caught a distant sound.

Presently it became audible to every one, the notes of a bugle echoing gayly from mountain to mountain, mingled with the rattle and clatter of harness and wheels along the Hastings road.

Cat's Eye and Crow's Foot instantly shrunk down into the smallest space imaginable, and began to creep away.

Neither had any fancy to meet the rough customers of the mail coach.

In a little while more, the tall, lumbering body of the great coach hove in sight at the entrance of the valley, covered with grayish-white dust, and loaded down with passengers.

The six horses in front trotted wearily along, as if they had made a long stage, and Jack Hardin and his comrade began to bustle about as the coach drew near.

As for Chevette and Levrette, it was evident that their idyl was over for the present. Before the coach was fairly in sight, both girls had hurriedly embraced Dick Darling, and sprung on their gayly-comparisoneed steeds, ready to gallop off in a moment.

Up rumbled the coach. As it drew up to the door, Dick Darling, neat and trim as ever, rode out of the corral gate on a bright "buckskin" mustang with black legs and tail, leading by a halter a second animal. He sat there as if ready for any duty, quiet and collected.

With a great clatter and rumbling, the coach drew up at the door, the burly red-shirted coachman flung down the reins and slowly swung off his perch, while bronzed miners who composed the load came piling out.

Dolores Station was the terminus of the stage route. Beyond it only the mail bags were carried, and passengers had to proceed on foot or hire or buy the extra horses of the Express Company.

In a moment there was an animated chaffering going on, while the two Indian girls, sitting like statues on their frightened and plunging horses, scared at the noisy coach-load, were surrounded with eager miners.

Dick Darling caught the mail-bag which was thrown him by the coachman, hastily secured it on the saddle of his led horse, waved his hand in farewell, and galloped away on the Hastings Trail, toward Carson.

"Helloa, Missy, what'll yer take for the paint hess?" shouted a rough miner, eagerly waving a bag of gold-dust to Chevette.

"I'll give five ounces down on the nail," said another, preparing to open his pouch. "Don't listen to that galoot, Missy. I've got the dust."

"Six ounces, and I'm thar every time," yelled a third to Levrette. "Git out of the way, fellers; the squaw lady sells to me."

"Hyar, station-master, got any hosses to sell?" said another fellow to Jack Hardin, confidentially.

"You bet," was the laconic response.

A moment later, there were three groups of miners after horses, but those around the girls were the most numerous and boisterous. It

was all in vain to assure them that the horses were not for sale. The refusal only raised the bids higher, till one burly miner laid his hand on Levrette's bridle and rudely said:

"Come, gal, git off. Hyar's twelve ounces, two hundred and fifty dollars; and that's more than any paint hoss is wuth, ary time. The cettur's mine!"

"Not by a durned sight, pardner," roared another man, seizing the horse on the other side. "I've offered more'n that a'ready, and hyar's the dust."

The confusion seemed likely to come to blows, when the clear, sharp voice of Chevette pierced the tumult like a knife, followed by the ominous click of a revolver lock.

"Let go my sister's bridle," said the girl, fiercely, to the disputants in English.

In a moment both hands dropped. The miners had thought the girls common Indians, and the clear, idiomatic English astonished them.

"The horses are not for sale," continued the girl, sharply. "If you're gentlemen, clear the way for two ladies. If not we'll make you."

As she spoke, as if by instinct the crowd fell back to right and left, the two girls struck spurs into their horses, and vanished in a cloud of dust, leaving behind them only a vague impression of beauty and freedom at which the miners gazed with stupid amazement.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ENAMORED CHIEFS.

In a lonely pass of the Sierra, overlooking the valley of Dolores Station, Levrette and Chevette were slowly riding along. The pass was that known as Humboldt's Pass, the mountains the Humboldt Range.

Overhanging precipices bordered the pass, and the wild goat and bighorn, not yet scared by the hunters' long-range rifle, peeped over the lofty pinnacles down at the lazy equestrians, who sauntered slowly along, chatting together in French.

They were strange girls both, instances of how the wild nature is stronger than civilization. Spite of their convent education, and the sight of all the great cities of the East, they seemed to be perfectly happy where they were, and to prefer the wild life to any other.

Suddenly, as they were in the pass, a crowd of ragged, half-naked Indians sprung up, as if by magic, all round them, and before even the rapid Chevette could draw a pistol, both girls were prisoners, with arrows, rifles and pistols pointing threateningly at their heads.

Then Cat's Eye, draping behind him a brand new scarlet blanket which he had drawn from the agent that morning, swept forward, and said, with a grim chuckle, in English:

"Much heap good, squaw. What t'ink now—hey?"

Chevette cast a glance of inexpressible loathing on the chief. She disdained to use the Indian tongue, although she spoke it well.

"Well, dog of a Ute," she said, bitterly. "So twenty Ute warriors are not too much to take two squaws, but they must point guns at them. Go. There is no dog like a Ute."

Crow's Foot, who stood beside Cat's Eye, seemed to be more of a brute. Stung by Chevette's words, he raised the long lance he carried, and was about to deal the girl a blow with the staff, when Cat's Eye interposed and prevented the blow.

"My brother must be patient," said the wily chief. "It is no use to spoil a squaw, till she grows old and ugly. Leave her to me."

Then changing his smooth flowing language to the imperfect English he used, he said:

"Say, git off hoss, bymebye. S'pose no, I make you."

Levrette, the indolent and stately, had not spoken all this while. Now she raised her voice and demanded:

"What do you want of us, Cat's Eye?"

"Want squaw. Want make fire, cook meat, nurse pappoose," grunted the Ute.

"Well, then, why don't you treat us civilly?" asked the girl, coolly. "You must learn to please a squaw, before she enters your lodge. This is no way to do it."

Cat's Eye stared at her a moment in surprise, and then burst into a contemptuous laugh, as he said:

"You t'ink Cat's Eye much heap fool, gal, but you see no. Git off hoss."

In a moment Levrette had whipped out a revolver, with a rapidity very unusual to her, and held it cocked against the Ute chief's head.

"Order your men back, or you die," said the girl, sternly.

She well knew the man she was dealing

with. Cat's Eye was one of the few cowardly Indians, and he quailed under the muzzle of the pistol.

Crow's Foot was not to be daunted thus.

"Shoot, squaw," he said, roughly. "Crow's Foot git two squaw then."

He had hardly spoken when Chevette, who had been watching her opportunity, raised the pistol she had stealthily drawn from her belt, and dealt the brute a quick rap under the ear, while his attention was directed to her sister.

Crow's Foot dropped without a sound, like a felled ox, and the daring girl, scattering revolver shots all round her, dug the spurs sharply in the mustang, and burst her way through the group that surrounded her.

Cat's Eye had instinctively dropped Levrette's bridle, and the girl made haste to follow her sister's example.

The Indians, with loud yells, began to pursue, firing as they went, but it was evident from the first that they were firing wild, and not very anxious to hit.

Cat's Eye ordered them to shoot at the horses, but by the time he could give the order, the animals were out of reach of any thing but rifle bullets, and the rifles were empty.

A moment later, both girls had disappeared round the base of the hill, and the discomfited chief saw that the prey had escaped him.

He took his disappointment with all the stoicism of an Indian. A white man, under the same circumstances, would have made the air blue with profanity. Cat's Eye simply squatted down on a rock by his partner in iniquity, and calmly waited the latter's recovery.

Crow's Foot was not long in coming to. The Indian skull is thick, the Indian's constitution strong. In a very few minutes the Ute chief opened his eyes, gave a stupid grunt, and then sat up.

"Where are the squaws?" he asked his comrade.

"Gone."

Crow's Foot gave another grunt, and relapsed into dissatisfied silence.

"We must leave here," presently observed the wily Cat's Eye. "The squaws have gone to the lodges of the Echipeta, and they will be after us."

Crow's Foot grunted again.

Presently, he said:

"Let us get horses and go on the Carson trail at once. The riding chief is there, and we can kill him, and come back. By that time the Echipeta will be going home again and we may strike them in the back."

Cat's Eye's face brightened with pleasure.

"My brother has spoken well. We will seize the Station horses, this very night. The best will be left. Is it good?"

Once more Crow's Foot gave vent to the expressive Indian grunt, which means any thing the warrior chooses, according to the expression of face which accompanies it.

Then the whole party rose and tramped off down the pass, till they came to a spot which commanded a view of Dolores Station in the valley below them.

There lay the station, silent and peaceful: all appearance. The corral only contained about a dozen horses, instead of the usual crowd, and a cloud of dust going down the valley toward Austin, told that the miners' party were off with the rest of the animals.

The "Pioneer" Coach, lying idle in front of the hut, showed that its journey was over for the day, and the six iron-gray horses that belonged to it, were feeding peacefully out of a trough in front.

"Listen," said Cat's Eye, sententiously. "The coach goes back to-morrow. Its horses are big and strong, and feed on corn. Let us take them too."

"Good," said Crow's Foot. "They will run well."

"And let us kill the men at the station," pursued Cat's Eye, cunningly. "lest they trail their horses in the morning. Dead men can not go to the agent and report us."

Crow's Foot looked at his companion with admiration. The rascality compelled his respect. He could appreciate it fully.

"Look," he said, pointing to the setting sun. "The time is come. The two white men will be drunk to-night. Let us go."

Cat's Eye nodded, and the party began to descend the mountain, together with the shadows of evening.

Meantime, in the adobe hut of Dolores Station, a very snug little party of two was gathered. Mr. John Hardin, of Kentucky, and Mr. William Grimes, of Illinois (usually called Billy Grimes), were seated on the opposite beds, in

tently watching the process of frying some salt pork on the hut fire, and every now and then applying for consolation to a big demijohn, the gift of Mr. Grimes, which stood in the middle of the floor.

"Hyar's luck, Jack," said the stage-driver, at one of these solemn pauses, as he inverted the demijohn in air, in sacrificial attitude.

"Drink hearty," responded the express-rider, with a bob of his head.

Then, as the host, he felt constrained to watch the frying-pan, where the fat was beginning to catch fire.

"Supper's ready, Billy," he said, affably, setting the frying-pan on the floor, and producing a great loaf of unleavened bread, familiarly known among miners as a "man-killer."

Then, as the two rough frontiersmen set to at their supper, down the mountain, toward the station, crept a score of dirty Utes, hungry for blood and plunder.

And darkness came over the valley.

CHAPTER V.

THE HAPPY VALLEY.

SIXTY odd years ago, when Lewis and Clark first crossed to the Pacific ocean, they found the great tribe of the Echipeta, or Blackfeet, the most powerful of all the wandering bands that possessed the vast wilderness of plain and mountain. In that very expedition, also, were laid the foundations of the inextinguishable hate which afterward characterized all the relations between Blackfoot and pale-face.

The Astoria settlement, the expeditions of Bonneville, Wyeth and the Sublettes, the long contest for the fur trade between the Hudson's Bay and American Fur Companies, with all their varied episodes of plenty and famine, riotous feast and bloody war, only served to intensify this feeling. Whatever might be done in the way of treaty with other tribes, three separate organizations stood out in the North-west, like the Comanches and Apaches in the South, as remorseless foes to the whites. Sioux, Blackfoot and Crow were each in their way equally formidable, but the Blackfoot was the most dreaded of all. The Dakota was a cut-throat, by name and nature, but he made truces for trade; the Upsaroka, with all his beauty of figure and face, was generally only a cunning horse-thief; but the Echipeta was a warrior that never rested, day or night; who preferred scalps to horses, revenge to booty.

Thirty years later, Catlin appeared with pencil and pen, to save the remnants of all these powerful tribes from oblivion, and has left a record, obtained during a brief truce at a frontier fort, of what splendid fellows were those Blackfeet and Crows.

Perfect in physical contour, rejoicing in magnificent black hair, in which they took all the pride of a delicate lady, the artist found these wild nomads to be regular dandies in personal adornment, while as skillful as ever in war. He mentions the hair of two Crow chiefs as trailing the ground when they walked, in full dress, and describes their costume as tasteful and picturesque in the highest degree.

Both tribes were then uncontaminated by the whites, their attitude of relentless hostility having served as a means of self-preservation, but in that first parley with the pale-faces, at which Catlin was present, the seal of destruction was imprinted on the two tribes, the noblest of all, by the irresistible hand of fate.

At that time, the Blackfeet numbered fifteen hundred bands, or villages, scattered from the British dominions to the present bounds of Colorado; the Crows, nearly half as numerous, occupied the present territory of Wyoming, bordering on the great Dakota or Sioux nation, and both were dreaded by the whites beyond all the rest.

In the same year, and during the following spring, the besom of destruction swept away both tribes, and the names of Echipeta and Upsaroka were almost annihilated. What bullet and knife had recoiled from, fire-water and the loathly disease of civilization was to accomplish.

The small-pox, breaking out in that year with fearful virulence, swept over the North-west like a destroying angel; and left, of all the Blackfoot nation, scarce six hundred lodges. Whole villages died like sheep, and the next summer saw the survivors shorn of power and influence, a miserable remnant, that has never since raised its head to check the march of civilization to the setting sun.

A few years ago, when we all heard and shuddered at the merciless punishment inflicted by Sheridan's orders on a little band known as the Piegan Indians, few recognized in those

poor wretches the little remnant on American soil of the once powerful Echipeta tribe, that had lorded it over the plains, and compelled tribute from the strongest.

At the breaking up of the Blackfoot nation, one little band, numbering thirty-five lodges at first, increased to seventy in later years, instead of moving to the safe shelter of British territory, as did the bulk of the nation, emigrated southward to the shelter of the great primitive ranges, then almost unknown to the whites, now included in the north of Nevada.

Here, in a large valley, with a southern exposure, where pasture was plentiful all the year round, as in California, this little band had held their station, carefully keeping out of the way of the whites, and increasing to double their original numbers in a single generation.

Their chief was now an old man, who had been Medicine Chief of the whole Blackfoot nation in the days of their glory, who had been bitter in his opposition to the treaty which had borne such terrible fruits, and who, on the dispersion of his tribe, had led a little remnant, composed of the aristocratic *Kainna* family, every member of whom had a right to sit in the council of chiefs, to the happy valley.

Eagle Wing was distinguished by a grave wisdom of character, that procured him the ascendancy, rather than by personal strength in the field, and the thirty-five warriors who followed him, being all chiefs, were the very elite of their tribe, and superior to double the number of any other braves.

The great Medicine Chief had exacted an oath from every one never to touch the fire-water of the whites, never to trade with them save for weapons, nor to associate with them, unless adopted into the bands.

Under his wise and cunning rules, the little tribe, who still proudly styled themselves "Kainna Echipeta," had maintained themselves in independence, accumulated the best weapons of the whites, kept clear of trouble with the emigrants that passed near them, and seemed to be in a fair way to returning prosperity.

But one white man had ever seen their camp, and he was adopted into the tribe. This was the French trader, Jean Baptiste Ledoux, who had aided them to procure arms, and whose daughters we have already seen in our story.

Just as the red glow of the setting sun shone on the white mountain-top, above the happy valley, Chevette and Levrette galloped into the village and halted before the council-lodge, in front of the painted war-pole.

The scene before them was quiet and peaceful in character, but picturesque and romantic in the highest degree. The remnant of the Echipeta had learned of adversity, and their village was a model of neatness.

Seven lodges of light-dun buffalo hide, dressed without the hair, and covered with pictures emblematic of Blackfoot history, were ranged in four lines, about two streets, closed at one end with a fifth line of six large lodges, of which the "Medicine-lodge" was the most finished.

All the offal and garbage that usually renders an Indian camp so offensive was absent, and a large mound of ashes, indurated by rain and sun, at a distant corner of the valley attested that the Echipeta had returned to the process of cremation, used by their remote ancestors before the European conquest.

A flourishing field of Indian corn occupied the ground near the ash-mound, and the rest was full of grazing horses, not the little scrubby ponies of the northern prairies, but the larger and more beautiful mustangs of Texas and Mexico, obtained by trade with the southwestern tribes. Many of them, indeed, from their bone and size, gave token of a mixture of more civilized blood at a recent period, and the presence of a large bay stallion, some sixteen hands high, nearly thoroughbred, announced that the Kainna medicine chief had used his opportunities for improving the breed. This horse was the best result of a secret raid, undertaken some years before to the frontiers of the Texas settlements, for that very purpose. As a result of his far-seeing policy, Eagle Wing's band could outride any other tribes in his vicinity, and none dared attack the dangerous knot of tried warriors.

The cooking-fires were all kindled at the leeward flank of the camp, and the squaws were preparing the evening meal, while the warriors were gathered in a circle before the council-lodge.

Before this circle it was that Chevette and Levrette pulled up, and the former called out to Eagle Wing, in a loud voice:

"Great Medicine Chief of the Echipetas, the Ute dogs have insulted the maidens of thy

band. Cat's Eye and Crow's Foot, with twenty braves, tried to take us to their lodges in the pass."

A low murmur of surprise and indignation rose from the circle, and Eagle Wing calmly said:

"Dismount, daughters of the Echipeta. The council will hear your tale, and take vengeance for the insult."

The girls dismounted, and entered the council.

CHAPTER VI.

DICK DARLING'S VISION.

ON the walls of the convent of Santa Clara, sheltered from view in a corner of the battlements, stood a group of women, four in number, all dressed in long sweeping robes, their faces surrounded by bandages like grave-clothes, while their long, sweeping veils were thrown back on account of the heat. The great strings of wooden beads which hung from their girdles, terminating in crucifixes, and the downcast, restrained look of their faces, sufficiently marked them for nuns, even had not their presence in a convent on that wild spot, remote from human habitation, pointed out that they were no ordinary women.

Three of this group were professed nuns, in funeral black, the fourth wore the white robes of a novice or postulant.

There was a great dissimilarity, also, between the faces of the nuns and the novice. While the former were commonplace old women, wrinkled and worn, with an expression varying from seeming sanctity to fretful piety, the novice was a young girl whose sweet face could not be hidden even by the disfiguring head-dress of a nun.

Her face was perfect in contour as that of a Greek statue, her smile showed pearly teeth, and when she lifted her eyes, which was very seldom, their beauty fairly awed one. Large and serious, dark-blue in color, almost black, they reminded one of the gaze of one of Rafael's Madonnas. The whole expression of her face was one of saintly purity and rapt enthusiasm, for this young girl was already a fanatic of the most intense kind.

But such a sweet little fanatic as one might fall down and worship, or follow into any extravagance, for the sake of a smile of approval from those rosy lips!

Now the little novice stood on the wall, with the old nuns, gazing over a wild, desolate landscape of barren, snow-capped mountain and yellow-baked plain, without any sign of human habitation or cultivation, beyond the convent garden, which supplied them all with food.

They stood by the stone bell-tower, watching for the sunset, when the Angelus was to be sounded; and as they waited, the four nuns chatted, in the innocent convent prattle that was habitual with them.

"Did you see Sister Felicia this morning, Sister Ursula? She tripped and nearly fell, as she entered the chapel."

"I wouldn't be as clumsy as Sister Felicia for a good deal," grumbles Sister Ursula. "She spilt the soup on the refectory floor, and I had to scrub it up this morning. I wish she'd stayed at Guadalupe, instead of the bishop sending her here."

Sister Felicia was a good-hearted, clumsy, Mexican *poblana*, who had conceived it her mission to become a nun, but having no money to endow a convent, she was obliged to do all the rough work, in common with the poorer sisters in general.

"Poor Sister Felicia," said the sweet voice of the youthful novice, pityingly; "it is not her fault that God made her clumsy, Sister Agatha. She is so good and kind when we are sick, that we ought all to love her."

Sister Ursula turned aside to Sister Catherine, and whispered:

"La Chiquita is a little angel, Katrina. She makes us all ashamed, with her sweet ways."

Sister Agatha tossed her head. She did not love Sister Felicia, if she was a sister nun.

The little novice turned away her sweet, serious eyes, and began to talk in that musing, half-unconscious manner that often marks the religious enthusiast, as she gazed over the landscape.

"How good our Father in heaven is, Ursula, to have put us where he has, in our little fold! If we were in one of the convents near the city, it would be so much harder to turn away the soul from the world and its pleasures, to the duties of a bride of our Lord. Here we see nothing but heaven and its Maker's works, and nothing can disturb the serenity of our contemplation of the Divine Mystery. Oh, what a blessed lot is ours!"

Even while she was speaking, came a low, thundering sound, which soon resolved itself into the regular hoof-beats of a horse at speed, and the three old nuns started and began to listen.

The sound came from the plain below them, but the horseman was yet invisible, being hid by an angle of the tower.

"It is the mail-rider," said Sister Ursula, hurriedly turning to bustle down the tower steps. "The bishop promised to send Reverend Mother some papers from Los Yankis, and I expect a letter from my brother."

As she spoke, she hurried away with Sister Agatha, leaving Sister Catherine and the little novice alone by the walls.

Sister Catherine cast a glance at the sun, whose lower limb was just about to touch the Sierra Nevada. Then she entered the bell-tower, saying:

"Call me the moment he vanishes, Chiquita, and I will toll."

La Chiquita (the little pet) as she was affectionately called, bowed her head gravely, and moved out into the embrasure of the battlement, where she stood like a solemn, beautiful white statue, looking out over the plain.

Perhaps it was because her eyes were used to looking down, according to the rule of her order, or that the sun dazzled them, that she did not watch the great luminary as closely as she ought to have done to time the Angelus.

Be that as it may, she allowed them to sink down on the plains beneath the wall, and stood there, with one finger at her lip, the other hand on the battlement, looking down.

And thus it was that, standing there with downcast eyes, the noise of horse-hoofs grew louder, and a trim, handsome young cavalier, in bright-blue uniform, galloped into view, and glanced up at the convent, just as he passed under the novice's feet.

And somehow or other—there is a strange fatality in chance—as the beautiful girl looked down, Dick Darling looked up, and she saw his fresh, handsome young face, framed in curling chestnut hair, and then La Chiquita shrunk back, blushing scarlet.

For careless, light-hearted Dick, thinking no harm, but seeing a beautiful face, removed his hat as he galloped by, and waved it toward her, as if in salute.

He even checked his horse to a slow canter, for the novice, in spite of her alarm, had somehow not shrunk out of sight entirely, and until he turned the angle of the castle and disappeared, Dick's eyes remained as if riveted on the graceful form of La Chiquita.

Crimson still, and trembling from head to foot, the young novice remained as if spell-bound, watching the vanishing figure of the horseman. Then, as he disappeared, she uttered a long, quivering sigh, and covered her face with her hands.

She raised it again with a start to look at the sun.

The sun had disappeared too, and she knew not how long.

With a low sob of inexpressible humiliation and grief, the poor little novice, who knew not her own feelings, and imagined she had done a deadly sin, rushed from the battlement, and flung herself on her knees on the stone rampart by the bell-tower door.

"Ring, ring, Sister," she gasped, rather than said; "oh, Holy Mother of Heaven, pardon my sins."

And as the convent bell tolled out the solemn summons of the Angelus, poor little Francesca sobbed as if her heart would break, and began to pray fervently for strength to resist temptation, and for pardon for the heinous sin she had just committed, in looking at a man.

And yet she had not done anything very terrible to our notion.

Meantime, Dick Darling, haunted by a beatific vision of a sweet, serious face, with great, solemn eyes, that reminded him of an angel's, pulled up his horse to a walk, and approached the convent gate, just as the Angelus tolled out.

Extracting a small package of letters from his mail-bag, he uttered a loud, cheery call at the gate, expecting an answer, in his innocence. Sisters Ursula and Agatha, who had got within twenty feet of the said gate when the bell began to ring, both ground their teeth when they heard Dick's call. They wanted letters and news, and did not dare to stir to get them. The Angelus had sounded, and like every one else in the convent, the two nuns were on their knees, gabbling away Paternosters and Aves, against time.

Dick gave a second halloo; and then could

wait no longer. With a scientific jerk, he sent the package flying over the gate, and galloped off. The letters fell between Ursula and Agatha, in the midst of the third Ave.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOY RIDER.

THE busy little town of Carson City was humming like a hive of bees in the early morning as the Express Rider galloped out of the place and took the old Hastings Trail for his return trip to Dolores Station. He had made three hundred miles inside of twenty-four hours on thirty horses, taken a six hours' sleep, and was now in the saddle again, ready to repeat the feat.

No man but one hardened by constant practice could have performed such a ride, but Dick was young and strong, in constant training, and rode like a centaur. The pony expressmen were used to it, and did such things as a part of their regular life.

Away through the mists of early dawn went the mail-rider, erect in his saddle, while the active mustang stretched away beneath him like an antelope. The mail-bags, simply strapped to the saddle behind and before, so as to remain firm without a symptom of flapping, were carefully balanced before he set out, so as to distribute the weight evenly. Dick's saddle was of that plain, serviceable pattern known as the McClellan tree, which combines the best points of Mexican, Comanche, and hussar saddle in one. Without flaps, and resting on a thick felt saddle-cloth, it could be tossed on and girthed tight in half a minute, the time allowed for changing horses at stations.

Dick was a figure to look at as he galloped away, trim, neat and erect, sitting down deep in the very center of his saddle, his legs hanging easily down, with a careless grace that tells of long practice.

Loose and easy in appearance as in his seat, one may observe that he never stirs from his place for the quarter of an inch. The upper part of his body sways regularly to the motion of the horse, but from the waist to the knee his thighs seem glued to the saddle. The bright, gleaming boot hangs nearly plumb with the shoulder, and the toe hangs down ever so little, resting in the hooded stirrup without effort. One hand held close to the belt-plate divides the reins, which are hardly stretched, feeling the horse's mouth with gentle touch; the right arm hangs loosely by the side, hovering over the pistol that stands at the right hip, ready for instant use.

Man and horse, as they gallop along, seem parts of the same animal, and down the long valley they pass at the rate of twenty miles an hour.

Before them is a yellow plain, baked to the hardness of a brick in the long summer of the West. Far ahead, at the other side of this plain, lie the rolling foot-hills that form the outskirts of the Second Humboldt Range and the Interior Bush Range, toward which Dick is galloping.

No canter or hand-gallop does the Pony Expressman keep. From the start he has been at full jump, and when the wiry little mustang seems inclined to slacken its pace, he shakes the bridle.

Away goes the horse, as fresh as ever, and at the same wild speed. A cattle-herder lounging on his horse in the neighborhood of a great troop of oxen, who are plucking away at the dried-up grass, hears the light patter of hoofs and looks up. The oxen start and stare at the rapid figure that goes past like a flash, the blue rider, erect and lithe, swaying to and fro with every stride, the sorrel mustang with bushy mane and tail, black with sweat as he tears along.

A moment later cattle and vaquero are left behind, as the mail-rider scours away over the hard plain, through a field of stunted wild oats, where the trail stretches onward, straight as an arrow, broad and plain, to the east.

Now, with a rapid rhythmic rumble of the earth, as the galloping hoofs strike the hard soil in regular beats, the rider flashes through the field, and dashes up a gentle slope on the other side. On the top of the swell he pauses for a moment at a slow canter, till his horse clears its nostrils with a vigorous snort, then shakes the bridle, and touches the flank of the steed sharply with the spur. They have come five miles in fifteen minutes, and the horse begins to feel tired, but the rest of the road is down hill, and far away in the distance Dick sees the white walls of the next station, where they are watching for him, with a fresh horse in waiting.

Away goes the mail-rider, after that touch of the spur, with a magnificent burst of speed that covers a mile within two minutes and a half. When the horse begins to slacken his pace, the other spur gives a sharp reminder, and another mile is covered under its impetus.

The mustang, black with sweat a little time before, is now white with foam, and begins to pant heavily.

But the station is now too plain in sight to allow of more mercy. For about a quarter of a mile further Dick allows his steed its own way, till it utters a heavy snort, then he presses in both spurs with a decided dig, and shoots away with renewed speed.

Now he can distinguish the thatched roof of the station and some moving figures. Once more presses in the spurs, and the hard-driven horse gives a grunt of disgust and switches his tail as the pressure compels him to exert himself more than ever.

Away at a long-stretching laboring gallop, but almost as fast as ever, every few hundred yards the spurs drawing blood, for the same speed must be kept up. The mail-rider is racing against time.

Now he can see men and horses at the station and even count their numbers, besides distinguishing the color of the horses and dresses.

"Aha," he says to himself, "they bring out old Gray Eagle very often, but the old horse is there, every time!"

Then he shakes the bridle, stands up in the stirrups to ease the horse, calls to him coaxingly, and pats his neck.

For a few strides the animal freshens up, and then relaxes again. They are now a mile from the station.

"Come then," says Dick, as he sits down again; "it's rough on you, I admit, but business is business, old horse. So sail along now."

Then he plunges in the spurs and keeps them there, while the poor horse, gathering vigor alike from the pain and the sight of the station, puts forth all its strength for a last burst, and comes tearing into the station laboring fearfully, with Dick's spurs going at each flank.

By saving the animal at first, he had screwed it up to go ten miles in twenty-nine minutes, and has gained one minute on time!

As the reeking horse stops of its own accord at the post, Dick leaps off as light as a boy, for he is yet fresh in the morning.

The two station men rush at the exhausted mustang, strip off the saddle in a moment, and fling it on the back of a dapple gray horse, sturdy in frame, who stands ready to go the next stage.

"The old gray looks well, Dick," observes one. "He's been getting rumbunctious in the stable on his corn. Kicked Judy Magee yesterday, and cut her haunch open. 'Thar he is, all ready. Guess he'll take yer on time.'"

"Hope so," says Dick, briefly. "Give a leg, Jim."

Jim seizes the left leg that he crooks for the purpose, and tosses him up into the saddle. Dick Darling is as careful of extra exertion for himself as his horses.

The mail-rider settles himself down, & then up the horse's reins, gives a chirrup, and Gray Eagle starts like a thunderbolt, kicking as he goes and shaking his head. He is known as the gamest and most vicious horse on the route.

Dick Darling sits loose and easy in his saddle, not attempting to check the horse's antics. He knows that from long habit, the brute would go straight, and cares for nothing else. He gathers up the reins a little to keep his head up and stop the kicking, and away goes Gray Eagle like an arrow from a bow toward the mountains.

The next station is at the foot of the range.

Dick Darling, careering onward at a speed of twenty miles an hour, seems as fresh as when he started, while the sturdy, vigorous horse beneath him for the first few miles enjoys the work.

Mile after mile vanishes, each well within its prescribed limit of three minutes, and still the old horse stretches along, with one ear laid back, the other cocked forward, while he swings his head from side to side in play. Old Gray Eagle has traversed that track too many times not to know every step.

Upright and gently swaying to the stride, the mail-rider sits in his saddle, his eyes roaming over the landscape, vaguely dreaming of present, past, and future, for he has almost forgotten what he is about.

And across his brain, as he rides along, comes stronger and clearer the vision of a pair of dark, serious eyes and a Madonna face, the vision of the beautiful nun whom he saw on the rampart of the Nun's Mission of Santa Clara.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CORRALED KENTUCKIAN.

"WHAT'S the matter with the hosses?" suddenly demanded Mr. Grimes, pausing in the act of lighting his pipe after supper, and listening.

The stage horses of the "Pioneer" coach, which stood at the feed-box, within ten feet of the door, were rattling their halter-chains and uttering uneasy snorts.

Jack Hardin started up and listened at the door.

"Wait till old Rat-tail speaks," he whispered. "I'll be sure then. I reckon it's some o' them thievin' Utes around, but I ain't sartin—"

He was interrupted by the sonorous bray of an old mule that roamed loose about the straw-yard, a sound followed by an angry squealing from all the mustangs there.

"Utes, by the ghost of General Jackson," said Hardin, hastily. "Git on yer irons, Bill, and we'll chaw the greasy varmints up in the shaking of a yaller dawg's tail."

As he spoke, he hurriedly picked up his belt, and buckled it round his waist, an example followed by Billy Grimes. The two frontiersmen were accustomed to hold the degraded Indians round them in abject contempt, and took no further precaution against surprise than to blow out the light before sallying out.

Then Jack Hardin flung open the door and rushed out into the night, with a cocked revolver in each hand, followed by the stage-driver, similarly armed.

Bang, bang, bang! went several rifles as they ran out, and Grimes uttered a cry of pain and anger as he felt a bullet tear through the calf of his leg.

In a moment more a score of dark forms seemed to spring up from the earth, and come rushing at the borderers, when a confused and furious fight ensued.

The night was bright with stars, but there was no moon, and all aim was necessarily instinctive, as both parties opened with revolvers, two against twenty.

The flashes of the firearms were incessant, and shouts, yells, cries, and shots made a perfect pandemonium in front of the little hut for nearly two minutes, at the expiration of which time the voice of Jack Hardin was heard roaring:

"Run, Billy. They're too much for us. Into the stockade."

A moment later two dark figures were seen to break away from the confused group of savages, one of them limping as he went, and run for the hut.

The Indians pursued, but several of their number lay on the ground, and most of their revolvers were empty. The two whites gained the door of the hut and were rushing in when Crow's Foot, the real leader of the assault, ran up behind the stage-driver, who was in the rear, and fired the last load of the revolver into the poor fellow's back.

Bill Grimes staggered, uttered a wild shriek, and threw up his arms, as he fell forward on his face over the threshold, jamming the door close to, behind Hardin, who had just sprung in.

This latter circumstance was all that saved the Kentuckian's life. The door opened outward, and the dead body of Grimes resisted the efforts of the first Indian, who seized the edge of the door-frame to pull it open.

The expressman turned as he heard the crash of the door, and seized hold of the great staples that held the inside bar, pulling with all his might.

But whereas the dead body without helped him to close it below, something above resisted all his efforts, and he heard the dull sound of cracking bones and tearing flesh, as he crushed in the fingers of the Indian who had seized the edge of the door.

The savage howled with pain, but Jack had the advantage of a good hold and would soon have managed to bar the door, had not two bullets come crashing through the boards, one of them passing through his right side, plowing up the flesh.

The next moment Jack dropped the staple, after one vigorous wrench with all his weight, bounded across the hut to the back door, and was into the granary before any one could catch him, unfamiliar as they were with the premises.

The granary was really the fortress of the post, being a square stone building, some twenty feet high, with thick walls, loop-holed above the doorway, and built with projections to flank the entrance. Like the living hut, the door opened outward. Unlike that, it was made entirely of iron plates and secured with a spring lock. The roof of this little fortalice was heavy in frame and covered with thick sheet-iron, purposely to

resist the undisciplined efforts of the very foes Jack was now fighting against.

As the expressman rushed in, followed at a few feet distance by his yelling enemies, several knives were thrown at him, of which two struck him, one gashing his left shoulder the other his thigh.

Wounded as he was, however, he managed to run in, and slam the door to after him.

"Thank God!" ejaculated the rough Kentuckian, fervently (for the first time for many years) as he heard the spring lock catch behind him. He knew he was safe, for the door was perfectly smooth outside, with no handle, and the key was hung round his neck. The most skillful burglar would have been puzzled to get in, with all his array of tools, and to Indians the place was absolutely impregnable.

He heard their yells of disappointment outside, and the crash of heavy bodies against the door, but the thick plates, resting against the solid stone, did not so much as shake; and the expressman knew that he was quite safe.

Then it was that he found time to realize that he was badly hurt. His right arm was powerless; the warm blood was streaming down from numerous wounds, and he felt faint and dizzy.

His first instinct, however, was not for self. Like a true American, he thought first of his duty, and of the orders about what to do in a similar case, left him by "The Company," that unknown entity, which represented to Hardin the world of civilization, from which he was temporarily divorced.

Swaying dizzily from side to side, he staggered through the pitch dark room, feeling his way to the lantern and match-safe, to strike a light.

A moment later, he was clumsily trying to approach the flame to the wick, which seemed to spin round and round in the air, and when at last he succeeded in lighting it, he fell back on the hard clay floor nearly insensible.

Then a thought revived him. "The Company" had provided a bottle of spirits for just such emergencies, which stood in a niche by the lantern. Slowly and doily he rose on hands and knees, and succeeded in crawling up to it, uncorking the bottle, and taking a draught. The effect was immediate. As the fiery liquid flowed down the throat, Hardin seemed to gather new strength; and then he stood up without help, and went on with his duty.

The Indians were shouting and yelling at the door, battering it with gun-stocks, and rails torn from the stockade. Every now and then they would fire a volley of bullets at the insensible door, which defied their efforts, while they howled out the most fiendish threats in their broken English against the single man who was inside.

Leaning against the wall and pointing upward, was a long pipe of sheet-iron, like a stove-pipe; and this the expressman caught hold of, and pointed diagonally upward, out of a hole close under the eaves of the roof.

It stuck there, on account of the slope of the orifice; and Hardin ran across the room, and extracted, from what seemed a bundle of firewood, a long, slender stick, bearing at its end a gay-colored cylinder of pasteboard, with a conical head.

It was nothing more or less than a rocket.

A moment later, it was in the tube, lighted, and soaring aloft in air, scattering crimson sparks, to announce to the stations far and near that the Indians were on the war-path.

And then a sudden hush came on the crowd outside.

They knew what that signal meant.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT THE CLOISTER BEAUTY SEES.

SISTER FRANCESCA, familiarly known in the nunnery by the various names of Pancha, Panchita, and La Chiquita, during her novitiate, had just risen from her knees by the bell-tower of the convent, where she had been praying alone for the last half-hour before sunset.

Since she had caught sight of that strange vision of the evening before, which had enticed her out of the peaceful paradise in which she had so long rested securely, and given her one short glimpse of the possibilities of her own nature, La Chiquita had been strangely silent and reserved.

All the next day she had taken every opportunity to steal away from the nuns, and wander in the convent garden, or pace the battlements.

And yet, strange to say, she had not mentioned to any one that she had once allowed her eyes to wander on the forbidden sex. Not even to old, superannuated Padre Junipero, the convent confessor, had she breathed a word of it,

though she had been to confession, and the purblind old man had sleepily questioned her on the regular round of the "seven deadly sins," and hurried her off with an absolution, as a matter of course. Confessing La Chiquita was a mere form to Padre Junipero, for the sins were so ridiculously trivial, and always ran so much in the same track, that the confessor was fain to stifle a yawn, even when he blessed the innocent little novice at absolution.

But to-day, La Chiquita, even after confession, felt guilty. She had not told the good padre *everything*, and especially she had not mentioned that handsome youth, whose eyes had met hers, and whose face and figure floated before her mental vision ever since, as if indelibly imprinted there, coming between her and the crucifix, interfering with her prayers, and always galloping, galloping, noiselessly on, with face turned toward her, and bright brown eyes meeting her own.

Poor little Francesca felt dreadfully wicked when she found herself dreaming of this young man, even during mass, and to make amends for it, the little enthusiast went without her dinner for penance, though her appetite was as hearty as that of any other young girl in good health.

In the evening, no doubt for further penance, she volunteered to take on herself Sister Agatha's turn of duty, to ring the Angelus, which the old nun, who was growing rheumatic, was glad to yield to her.

Here she was, then, all alone on the flat roof of the convent, standing by the bell-tower, watching for the sunset, which, as it still wanted half an hour of the time, was a very meritorious penance on her part.

And then, being all alone on the silent ramparts, Sister Francesca began to pray earnestly for strength to forget this disturbing vision, which she was sure the devil had sent to draw her from her holy work. La Chiquita prayed and sobbed earnestly, but whether it was the devil, or nature rebelling against unnatural laws, certain it is that she found herself, without intending it, praying that the handsome stranger *might come that way again*, and that she might be the instrument of his conversion to the true church.

And when once she got on that road, it was surprising how the words came, and how earnestly and heartily she prayed. There was no more vague and wandering thought, then. She seemed like one inspired, and her face glowed with a bright light, and she pictured in her rapt prayer what a blessed lot it would be for her to lead this stray sheep into the true fold, and then to see him safe all the rest of her life.

Somehow, she never pictured herself as shut up from him by the convent walls after that convenient conversion. How they were to be near each other, she had but a vague idea, but in her fancy no thought of separation had place, and it was with a bright face and cheerful heart that she rose from her knees by the bell-tower, at last, and looked out over the landscape.

Of course she was only looking to see how near sunset it was, and of course she did not want to dazzle her eyes by looking the sun full in the face. Only eagles do that, and she was a very tender little dove.

So she first explored the plain below the convent walls with her eyes, to the east, then to the west, gradually working her way up toward the sun, so as not to be dazzled.

And thus it befell, that she distinguished, far away from the walls, on the Carson trail, a moving speck, which advanced toward the convent at a rapid pace; and La Chiquita's eyes gleamed, and again she blushed scarlet, while a smile wreathed her lips in spite of herself, and she whispered softly:

"Oh, Madre de Dios! *el viene!*" (Mother of God! he comes!)

Yes, there was no mistaking the regular, rapid bounds of the horse at full speed, tearing toward the convent gate. Minutes passed like a flash to the waiting girl, who stood riveted to the spot, eagerly watching the gallant figure that came sailing along, with a rapid undulating grace.

Nearer and nearer comes the horseman, in the midst of the red flames of sunset, and soon she can distinguish the neat, erect figure, in its close blue uniform, the black mustang beneath him galloping on, gray with foam, while—oh, how the heart of La Chiquita beats!—the rider's gaze is unmistakably fixed on the ramparts of the convent, at the foot of the bell-tower.

Unconsciously, the warm, impulsive Spanish girl extends her arms. She forgets she is in a convent, soon to take the veil; she only feels that some chord in her nature is quivering to her

very heart, and falls on her knees, calling, in low tones:

"Oh, Dios, lo guarda! Venga, venga, querido!" (Oh, God, guard him! Come, come, beloved!)

Then, as she kneels there by the battlement, watching the approaching horseman, who is so near that she can distinguish his white face from his hair and clothes, suddenly an expression of deadly terror comes over her own countenance, at what she next sees and hears.

A loud yell rends the air, and at least a score of Indians on horseback suddenly gallop out from the ruins of an old stable, that once belonged to the convent, in the days when it was a hacienda.

How they got there, how long they had been hidden, La Chiquita could not dream. She only knew that now, just as her cavalier's features became for the first time distinguishable, out rushed the mob of galloping savages, and opened a furious fusillade on the young mail-rider.

It all passed in a moment, and the next she saw Dick Darling drop his bridle on his horse's neck, bend forward to the saddle-bow, plunge in his spurs with a loud yell, then rise again, with a revolver in each hand, while his charger sped forward like an arrow from a bow.

The Indians were on him in a moment, and the pistols flashed to and fro in the crimson sunset, while the spell-bound novice, all aghast, stood as if rooted to the spot, gazing at the fierce skirmish.

She saw her hero burst through his foes like a thunderbolt, with the blood spirting from a dozen wounds, while the Indians hung round him, like wolves round a wounded buffalo, and still the cruel shots went to and fro, with their spiteful yellow flashes.

Now they were right under her very feet, careering along, and the innocent novice felt a thrill of strange pride, in the midst of all her terror, as she marked, in that supreme moment, the bearing of her hero.

Surrounded by pitiless red foes, firing into him from all sides, he neither quailed nor shrunk, but sat up erect in his saddle, firing steadily, and felling foe after foe, regardless of his own wounds.

Then, just as the battle passed beneath her, La Chiquita saw the black horse stumble and roll over, dead, while the savages fired down at the prostrate horse and rider, and the fallen man fired sternly back, till his last charge was gone.

Then she saw him fall back, as a last shot pealed out from above, and the Indians raised a fiendish yell of triumph.

La Chiquita covered her face with her hands, for she knew it was all over. She had seen him but twice, and they had killed him before her very eyes. She felt dazed and stupid at the sudden calamity.

She was aroused by a bevy of excited nuns, running screaming up on the battlements, to see what the dreadful din meant. They found the Indians standing respectfully round the body of the dead man.

Cat's Eye, cowardly and vindictive, was about to reach for his scalp, when the brutal Crow's Foot interposed, with an air of unwonted dignity.

"Touch not the scalp. Let the body lie," said the Ute chief, simply. "He was a brave man, and never quailed nor shut his eyes when I shot him. Let his body be honored. Come, let us go."

And the Indian chief waved back his party in admiration of the only virtue an Indian respects—a courage greater than his own.*

CHAPTER X.

THE SIGNAL AND ITS ANSWER.

THE council of Blackfoot chiefs was gathered round its fire in solemn conclave, listening to the story of Chevette and Levrette. As the girls described the manner in which they had been persecuted by their Ute admirers, and how the latter had finally attempted to secure them by force, some of the younger chiefs could hard-

* That this incident is not extravagant, nor alien to Indian nature, is evidenced by a recent account of a skirmish in Arizona, between a small party of the United States cavalry and the Apaches, in which five of the former were killed. One of these was a little boy, and of sixteen, who was seen with a spy-glass, from a fort near by, to be defending himself with a stubborn bravery that was not shown by his comrades. When the rescue party from the fort arrived, they found the Apaches gone, the bodies of the dragoons frightfully and disgustingly mutilated, while the lad's body was laid out decently, with his weapons beside him, entirely unharmed, save by his death-shot, a token of respect for his courage.

ly restrain their indignation by the rigid reserve of Indian etiquette.

There were men in that circle, tall, strong and brave, warriors scarred from a hundred contests, who were willing to lay down their lives for these very girls, and deemed them too good for their own lodges; and the idea of a despised Ute, a creature that usually went on foot and dug roots, daring to aspire to these pets of the Echipeta, angered the proud warriors beyond endurance.

"Let the warriors speak," said old Eagle Wing, gravely, "beginning at the youngest. What says Buffalo Horn?"

Buffalo Horn was a young chief of remarkably tall stature, and known as the swiftest runner of his tribe. He sprang to his feet, without waiting for a second invitation, and cried out:

"Whose dog is a Ute, that he should bite the hand of a maiden of the Echipeta? We have suffered them too long near our valleys. Let us take the war-path, and cut off every man of the Utes, till not one remains alive to boast that he has insulted a maiden of the Echipeta."

As he spoke, a chorus of approving grunts from the Indians around told that they were in unison with the speaker, and Eagle Wing said:

"It is well. Let Antelope Eye speak."

Antelope Eye was another young chief, soft and delicate in appearance, and noted for his personal beauty and soft, melting eyes.

"Antelope Eye is for war on the Ute dogs," he said, quietly, "and let the chief who brings home most scalps lead the Fawn to his lodge."

This proposition was treated with more emphatic approval than the other, but Eagle Wing found it necessary to interpose. "My son is too rash," he said. "The daughters of the stranger are sacred to the chiefs of the Echipeta, and must not be taken without their own will. Let the maidens speak. Are they willing to enter the lodge of that chief of the Echipeta who brings home the scalps of their enemies?"

For a moment both girls hesitated, and then Levrette answered for both. Turning to her sister, she said in French:

"It is our fate, sister. Only one of us can marry Dick. The other must go somewhere. Better a brave chief than a coarse white man. Let us promise. We can make the conditions impossible."

To the council she said:

"The chief that comes home with the scalps of both Cat's Eye and Crow's Foot in his belt, and can show ten scalps of the Utes besides, taken in fair fight, may claim either of us that he wishes, and we will enter his lodge and cook game for him. Is it good?"

"It is good," responded the Medicine chief, gravely, while a hush fell over the assembly at the nature of the feat demanded. "The daughters of the Echipeta can only be won by brave chiefs. They have spoken wisely and well."

The old chief was gratified at the girl's address. He knew that two rich and beautiful girls, such as they, were like firebrands amid heaps of chaff, among his impetuous young braves. The sight of a single favored suitor would be likely to raise a dozen disappointed ones, and might even end in causing divisions in the little tribe.

Hitherto the two girls had kept carefully aloof from the young men of the tribe, and Eagle Wing had vainly hoped that none of them were affected by the stranger's children.

The little speech of Antelope Eye had shown him how mistaken he was, and how the fire was already smoldering in many breasts.

The almost impossible nature of the task assigned for the favored lover, cast a damper on that fire. For any single chief to take twelve scalps out of one party was a matter of almost impossibility, and every one knew it; and old Eagle Wing rejoiced as he saw the flame of discord promptly quenched. Only a single warrior of all seemed not cast down by the task. This was a man of medium height, with very broad shoulders, and a trunk and arms remarkably muscular, for an Indian. His face and body were covered with scars, and he wore round his neck no less than three collars of the claws of the grizzly bear. His name among the Blackfeet was Bear Killer, and he had the reputation of being the strongest warrior of his tribe.

Bear Killer started up, when all the rest were silent.

"Whose dog is a Ute, that a Kainna should fear to take fifty of his scalps? Bear Killer will lead the party and bring back a hundred. See yonder!"

As he spoke, he pointed to the southern exit

of the valley, which looked over the foothills that hemmed in the valley of Dolores Station.

A little shower of red stars had just burst out in the air, and a moment later, the faint distant report of the bursting rocket came to their ears. Bear Killer had seen it first, and skillfully took advantage of the circumstance.

"See, men of the Echipeta Kainna," he cried. "The pale-faces are fighting in the valley, and it is the Ute dogs that are baying them. That is their sign to tell their brothers the foe is on the war-path."

A moment later, a second rocket shot up into the air from the station below, and exploded, scattering green and crimson flames all round.

Bear Killer pointed away down the valley to where the next station was known to stand. Before the stars of the second rocket had vanished, an answering streak shot into the sky, and told that the next station was aroused and passing the alarm.

"Let the warriors rouse and follow me," said Bear Killer. "There is no time to be lost."

He was turning away into the night, after his horse, when Eagle Wing spoke, and his deep, grave voice arrested Bear Killer.

"Hold," said the old chief. "The Kainna are not boys, to run on a trail without knowing what foe to meet. Let Bear Killer take thirty chiefs. It is enough against the whole Ute nation. The rest will remain to guard the camp. Even a Ute may be brave if he finds none but the squaws and gray-heads here. I have spoken."

Bear Killer bent his head reverently before the old chief, for all in the camp were accustomed to obey his slightest word. He called for volunteers, and selected from those that offered only the strongest and most enduring. Antelope Eye, the lithe, handsome young chief with the beautiful face, he was about to reject, but the young warrior was so urgent in his entreaties that the older one finally consented.

"But beware of lagging," he said, sternly. "Twill be a long trail and a blind one, and many eyes will be closing for weariness, ere we come back."

Antelope Eye smiled a proud smile, but he said nothing. Young braves are always modest in word, till they have taken a few scalps.

While the Blackfeet were discussing the preliminaries for their raid, rocket after rocket, to the number of six, went up from Dolores Station; and Bear Killer hurried them off.

It did not take long for the Echipeta warriors to prepare. Inside of five minutes from the time Bear Killer announced the names of the volunteers, thirty chiefs, each with a rifle at his back, a pair of revolvers in his sash, and carrying in his hand a long lance, sat on their spotted chargers at one side of the fire, awaiting orders.

Chevette and Levrette, armed like the rest, and equally well-mounted, took their posts in front of the center of the line, behind Bear Killer.

No one remonstrated, for it was an understood thing in the tribe that the girls did as they pleased, but many a young chief's heart beat higher as he saw the object of his secret adoration sharing the perils of the expedition, and knew that the girls would be with them.

Bear Killer gave the signal, and away they went in single-file down the valley toward Dolores Station.

When they reached the pass that overhung the valley, a bright crimson glare arrested their attention, and told the story plainer than words.

Dolores Station was afire, corral, sheds and all. The little stone granary alone stood up, black and ominous, amid the glare of the burning fences, and not a trace of human beings was visible.

With one accord the Blackfoot warriors galloped boldly down the steep mountain-side, to lift the trail before the light of the fires had vanished.

The marauders had escaped with all the horses.

CHAPTER XI.

JACK HARDIN'S HOT-AIR BATH.

AT the appearance of the first rocket that had shot up from Dolores Station, there was a dead silence among the crowd of Utes that surrounded it. They realized its meaning without any teaching. They had seen it before. Then, as with one consent, they set to work to do all the damage they could before decamping.

The mustangs in the corral, and the stage horses, were hastily got together, then the rails and posts of the corral and stockade, with the shattered fragments of furniture from the hut, and the hastily broken up pioneer coach, were piled in a heap before the door of the granary, and set on fire.

Dry as matches as was the fuel, the flame quickly spread. The paint and varnish on the coach helped to make it fiercer, and the wind, fanning the fire, soon made the heat unbearable outside, within a stone's throw.

Then the Utes, with a parting yell, galloped off down the valley, on their way to assassinate the mail-rider, an attempt which we have seen so nearly successful.

While they were lighting and piling the fire, Jack Hardin, within, had not been idle. By the assistance of the whisky-flask, he was inspired with factitious strength, under the influence of which he dragged out three more rockets, one after another, and sent them whizzing up into the air through the directing-tube, to scatter their warning sparks through the night.

When he heard the galloping horses of the Utes and their farewell yells, the rough station-master shook his clenched fist vindictively after them and muttered:

"Ah, ye infernal brutes, ye may run, but ef I don't get even with ye yet, I ain't Kentuck."

Then he set to work, with the coolness of an old frontiersman, to wash and bind up his wounds, which were numerous, but luckily not deep. Grazed he had been by several bullets, two arrows stuck in the fleshy part of his left arm, two knife wounds were in his back; but he seemed as tough as ever, as he deliberately broke off the arrow-shafts, drew them out of the flesh, and bound strips of old bags tightly around them to confine the bleeding.

He had already drank nearly half a pint of whisky, which had no effect save to clear his head, and when he had finished attending to his wounds, he applied himself once more to the flask, and took a long and hearty swig. The effect was immediate. He stood up and walked round, as strong as ever, to all seeming.

And then it was that he first began to be sensible of an increasing heat in the small and confined granary, as the fire, which had been wasting its heat outside, began to attack the center of the pile. Through the narrow loopholes, under the eaves, the bright tongues of flame began to dart; and had the roof been made of wood, the whole edifice would soon have been a mass of flame.

The heavy iron door began to glow with heat, and a dull red tinge, swiftly becoming brighter every moment, told that the intense heat of the dry wood in roaring flame was beginning to make itself felt. The interior of the granary, five minutes later, was like an oven in full blast, and the iron door was nearly white hot.

The tough station-master, fainting and nearly suffocated with the heated air, sunk gasping on the ground, and began to believe that his time was come.

His fall saved his life, for the earthen floor, still cool and damp, revived him, and he became aware that the builders of this granary, careless and hasty workmen, had built it in a most imperfect manner. The walls had settled, leaving cracks and chinks in the mortar, and in one place a hole, large enough to thrust a hand into, had been formed close to the ground, from which a cold stream of air was pouring toward the fire.

With a muttered thanksgiving, the station-master crawled toward the hole, and breathed in long draughts of that cool air, which he had never, till then, fully appreciated.

Meantime the heat above him became, if possible, fiercer than before, and a new danger revealed itself to his remembrance.

The hay-bales and grain-sacks were all uncovered, and at any minute the heat of the glowing doorway might set them on fire. Besides this, not six feet from his head, lay the bundle of rockets, at least a dozen of which remained.

As Hardin thought of the possible consequences of a fire inside, the cold sweat burst out from every pore. Hastily he started up, and lugged away the rockets to the opposite corner, behind some grain-sacks, while he pulled down a wagon-tilt over the hay-bales, on the side next the door.

Hardly had he done so, when he heard the sound of voices outside, the tramping of horses, and became sensible that some one was calling him in loud tones.

"Blackbeard! Blackbeard! Where are you?" The voice was the voice of a woman, and he recognized it.

It was the voice of Levrette Ledoux.

Jack Hardin tried to answer, but, to his surprise, he could not make himself audible. His throat seemed to be parched and dry, and refused to form a sound louder than a whisper.

Instinctively, he rushed to the water-keg which stood by the flask of strong liquor, and

took a deep cool draught. Then he hailed back.

"Here, here! For God's sake put out the fire!"

He had hardly spoken, when there was a cry of joy outside, and he heard a confusion of voices, while the sound of hissing steam and decreasing heat, showed that his friends, whoever they were, had obeyed the injunction.

The corral contained a little pool of water, and Levrette and the Echipeta warriors were busily engaged in casting its contents on the fire by the blanketful. Two warriors would seize a blanket by the corners, dip it rapidly into the water, scooping up several gallons in the sagging depression, then, running a few steps, cast a shower over the fire. The closely-woven, felt-like, Mackinaw blankets, worn by the warriors, were almost water-proof, and fifteen blankets, going simultaneously and incessantly, soon produced a marvelous effect.

Inside of three minutes the last vestige of fire was extinguished; and the iron door, cracked from top to bottom, exhibited the powers of sudden contraction in a striking degree.

Jack Hardin, inside, felt the heat decreasing, while the fire was being extinguished, and at last heard his friends knocking at the iron door.

Then he pulled out the key, and tried the lock.

A fresh discovery awaited him there. The heat had so bent and warped the wards of the patent lock, that it refused to turn, and he found himself a prisoner in his own fortress.

For a moment he was aghast at the discovery. In another he remembered that "the Company" had provided another means of egress, in an iron ladder in the corner of the room, which led to a trap door in the roof.

Calling out this intelligence through a chink in the door, he climbed the ladder, emerged from the trap, and stood once more in the open air.

Looking down into the faint gloom of the starlit night, he was astonished and horrified to perceive that his deliverers, as he had fancied them, were nothing less than a fresh band of Indians. No sooner had he made the discovery than he dived into the trap-door once more, expecting the whizz of a bullet past his head as he did so.

But none came, and after a silent pause he heard the voice of Levrette calling out:

"Blackbeard! Blackbeard! Where are you? Here are your friends that have come to save you, and you will not look out to see us. These are no Utes, but warriors of the Echipeta, come to help you and punish Cat's Eye."

Hardin cautiously protruded his head.

"All very pooty, Miss Levrette, but haow am I to tell that? Injuns is Injuns, and Injuns is p'sen. No offense to you, but hyar I'm safe. Outside I don't know haow long my skulp and me mout keep company, and I vallys my ha'r jess as much as yeou, miss."

CHAPTER XII.

THE RED TRAILERS.

LEVRETTE uttered an impatient laugh of vexation.

"Fool," she cried, angrily, "do you suppose we should have come here to put out this fire, when we might have helped to burn you up, if we had any need of your scalp? Where is my Darling? Tell me that, and you may stay here, for all we care. Tell us, where is our Darling?"

"Waal," returned Mr. Hardin, with exemplary caution, "he mout be hyar, and he mout be thar. That's how it is, Miss Levrette."

"I know he's on the Carson trail," cried Chevrette, impatiently interrupting her sister. "We saw him ride off this morning. What we want to know is, how far off is he now, when does he come back, and are the Utes likely to meet him? Tell us that."

"No, ye don't, missy," he said, shrewdly. "Betwixt you and me, I ain't on the pump biz to-night. You know how it is, yourself."

"In short," said Levrette, fiercely, "you refuse to tell us?"

"You bet," responded Hardin, laconically.

"Then his blood be on your head, if we fail to find him, fool," said the girl, vindictively. "The Utes have gone toward Carson, on his trail, and if they catch him before we get up, you lose your comrade."

So saying, she turned angrily away, and spoke to her train in the short, guttural Blackfoot tongue; for not one among them had understood the colloquy that was going on in English.

On hearing her words, the Blackfoot chiefs

uttered a sarcastic, taunting sound, between a laugh and a yell, in chorus, and turned away their horses. Then, as they galloped away on the Carson trail in single file, each chief contemptuously blew his nose at the granary, in token of his disgust at the white man's pusillanimity.

Jack Hardin took it very coolly.

"Snivel away, ye darned old painted varmint," he muttered. "Safe keep, safe find, 'an old sayin'; and one skulp's wuth a dozen bald heads. Ef you think Jack Hardin's gwine ter trust a Blackfoot, arter he's jest nigh killed by them Utes, you kin jest take it out in thinkin'. Hyar I stay, till the sogers comes, or the cump'ny sends on help. The hosses air gone, and I ain't gwine to ride no posts till I'm relieved, hyar."

And the station-master carefully secured the trap-door, and made a safe descent into the fortress, where he made his bed, lighted a pipe, and sat down for a solitary smoke, before turning in.

"Poor Billy Grimes," he soliloquized, "wiped out by a darned Digger Injun. You and I'll never hev another draw together."

And these few regretful words constituted the only epitaph ever received by poor Bill Grimes.

Meantime the Blackfoot warriors rode rapidly down the valley along the Carson trail, following, in a manner that none but Indians could have attempted at such a pace, and in such a light, the tracks of the drove of stolen horses and the marauding Utes.

There seemed to be no hesitation or embarrassment on the part of a single warrior, as they followed the lead of a slender young chief who rode in the advance, crouched on his horse's neck and carefully watching the ground ahead in the faint starlight.

And who was this young chief whom all followed so cheerfully?

It was no other than Antelope Eye, the young warrior noted for the beauty of his large melting eyes, which were also remarkable for their singular powers of seeing in the dark.

The only other Indian in those parts known to possess this power was Cat's Eye, the Ute, and between him, the hoary old reprobate, and the young and elegant Antelope Eye, a mortal hate, the deeper because it was hidden by both, existed.

Some years before, when the young Blackfoot was only a stripling of sixteen, Cat's Eye had met him, when out hunting, all alone.

The savage Ute, being the strongest, had also taken the lad by surprise, stolen his game and weapons, with the assistance of two other Utes, taken away his horses, one of which was loaded with game, and turned the lad out, stark naked, without so much as a knife, a hundred miles from his own camp.

He had only refrained from killing him for fear of the Blackfoot vengeance that was dreaded by all the neighboring tribes.

Antelope Eye reached home after terrible sufferings, nearly dead, and from that moment had never spoken a word to his tribe of the means by which he had been brought to such a pass. His mortification was keener than his pains.

But from that moment he had devoted himself to acquiring the knowledge of a warrior in every manner, and especially had become the most expert tracker and hunter in his tribe, always cautious, never again trusting any one outside of his tribe. All his earnings in the chase had been devoted to the purchase of arms, ammunition, and horses; all his spare time was spent in secret expeditions among the mountains, with what object, even his tribe knew not.

One thing was certain, that Antelope Eye possessed the finest horses and the best weapons in the tribe, and that the product of the chase was not at all sufficient to account for his riches. Had any one taken the trouble to watch him, they might have found the secret, in the transfer of certain little yellow lumps, brought from remote valleys, to the Indian traders at the forts, and that those nuggets were found by Antelope Eye.

But Indians are not prone to watch their own friends, and entertain too much contempt for gold, as a general rule, to care to preserve it.

So Antelope Eye, in his silent self-contained manner, had been preparing for his first war-path and his vengeance; and the solitary gleams that witnessed his secret preparations witnessed also the fruits of such a long patient practice in marksmanship as an Indian rarely attempts, and which was yet to elevate the silent lad into a renowned chief at a single bound.

All night long Antelope Eye led the band along at a rapid canter, seldom halting save to breathe the horses, never hesitating at the trail.

The early dawn found them nearly forty miles away, with the track of shod horses at a gallop still before them.

They had passed several stations, all lighted up, with horses safely housed behind stockades, doors barred, and rifles ready to welcome an attack. To all these they had given a wide berth, for, from their experience of Hardin's suspicious character, they anticipated trouble; and Eagle Wing's policy was one of undeviating peace and non-interference with the whites, a policy which had borne the happiest fruits, so far.

Now that the morning was come, Antelope Eye sat up straight, and glanced around him as he rode along. He expected evidently a divergence from the beaten track.

Nor was he mistaken. That apparently mysterious quality, which renders an Indian tracker's judgment so unerring, is in reality merely the exercise of a keen faculty of comparison, knowledge of the country and of the habits of the game followed, be it man or beast, white or red. The detective in a city, who follows up a criminal, displays exactly similar qualities in a different field.

Antelope Eye knew that his party was but a few miles behind the Utes, and that the latter were certain to deviate from the track in daylight, in order to escape observation from the Pony Express Stations. He judged that they would follow the Carson trail, in general direction, from what he had heard said by Levrette and Chevette, about Darling. Antelope Eye, with his other hidden accomplishments, understood considerable English and some French, though he never spoke either. His semi-civilized friends the half-breed girls, had assisted him in that, unknown to themselves; and in listening to them he had acquired a new tongue. Little thought either of the burning and consuming passion, that was hidden under the placid exterior of the handsome young chief, on whom they looked as almost a boy with good-natured indifference.

Suddenly, at the very moment the sun rose, Antelope Eye waved his hand to the right, swerved from the path, still at a gallop, and followed without hesitation a narrow but plainly marked track of shod horses, going at a gallop, which led off up a side gorge into the mountains.

An hour later he called a halt.

The trail ended in a deep narrow mountain stream, and not a vestige of tracks appeared on the other side.

Bear Killer ordered the warriors to dismount and feed their horses. Antelope Eye started upstream, on foot, Levrette and Chevette followed its course downward, and both were looking for tracks.

Ten minutes later, the sharp war-whistle of the young chief pointed them up-stream.

The trail was found again.

CHAPTER XIII.

COL. SAM JONES IN THE SADDLE.

In front of the ruins of Dolores Station, by daylight the morning after the assault, a party of some forty rough bearded miners and mountain-men, armed to the teeth with rifles, revolvers and knives, were gathered in groups about their horses, discussing the situation, in frontier style; while on the roof of the little stone granary, all that was left of the station buildings, Mr. Jack Hardin was seated, pipe in mouth, conversing with the relief party, and awaiting the construction of a rough ladder, to release him from his imprisonment.

Had the station-master been sound and whole, this help would not have been needed. Had the door opened inward, it might also have been broken down. As it was, it became necessary first, to help down the wounded man, and then to introduce a strong party to break out the door, which defied all efforts from outside, not offering space to insert even a wedge.

Around the blackened walls of the adobe hut, several corpses were scattered, four of them being Utes, in ragged U. S. uniforms, the fifth that of the unfortunate stage-driver. Poor Grimes's body had been fearfully mutilated, according to the barbarous practice of the Western Indians. The scalp was gone, the body was stuck full of arrows, stripped, and treated with every conceivable indignity.

No wonder, that in the faces of the rough miners, gathered round, could be seen a look of grim ferocity, such as boded ill to any Indians that might cross their path. Such outrages are unhappily still common in the West, and will be, as long as the irreconcilable antagonism between two fierce races is not put down by the strong hand of the higher law of the

general Government. To tell half the truth would cause us all to blush for human nature.

Jack Hardin had just finished his account of the attack, while his friends below were lashing together the rounds of their rude ladder, when the leader of the relief party inquired:

"And how is it that we find the fire out, and the brands pulled away from the door, Hardin, if they rode away as you say, leaving you to burn up?"

The speaker was Colonel Sam Jones, superintendent of the line, a man of old border experience.

"Waal, cunnel," said the Kentuckian, slowly, "'twar Injuns as put out that fire, I'll not deny."

"Indians! What Indians? Utes?"

"Waal, no, cunnel, 'twar Blackfeet."

"Speak out, man, what you mean. Are there Blackfeet round here?"

"Dunno fur sartin, cunnel. 'Twar them p'isen Utes as stampeded the stock and killed poor Billy, and I reckon 'twar Cat's Eye's band. Wal, arter I tetched off the skyoodles, they cavorted around a right smart chance, and then put, on the Carson trail. I'll allow I war e'en a'most gone, when I heern voices outside, and a couple o' gals war a-screechin' fur me. Waal, ter make a long story short, I hollered to 'em to put out the fire, fur God's sake; and fust thing I know'd, slump come the water, and that 'ar' door cracked open, fur it war nearly white-hot."

"Well, well," said the superintendent, impatiently; "get through. How did you find that your friends were Blackfoot Indians?"

"Seen 'em," replied the station-master, composedly. "You don't s'pose I kurn't tell a Ute from a Blackfoot, cunnel? 'Twar some of Eagle Wing's band, in the mountings, yonner, and there war two gals, as pretty as picters, a-ridin' thar at thar head. But you bet the painted cusses couldn't fool me, cunnel. They tried their darndest to git into the station, by pretendin' to be my friends, but Jack Hardin ain't no chicken, you bet."

"Did they fire at you?" demanded Jones, curtly.

"No; cunnel, I'll not say they did. The gals talked sweet, and tried to putend as they was friends, axin' whar war Dick Darling, as war out on the trail, and oughter be back ter-night, ef the p'isen imps don't snatch him bald-headed. But they couldn't git no news out of me, 'baout Dick, you bet."

"Oh, stop your infernal blowing, Hardin," cried the superintendent, in the rough, sharp way he had acquired in controlling such characters as the bragging station-master. "What did the Blackfeet do at last?"

"The rid off, cunnel," said Hardin, promptly.

"Very good. Now you're talking. Did they fire at you before leaving?"

"Nary shot."

"Where were you?"

"Spyin' aout of the scuttle-hole."

"Could they see you?"

"Guess so, cunnel."

"Then they didn't treat you so badly, after all."

"Didn't say they did."

"Umph. Did they say anything in leaving?"

"Nary word, cunnel."

"Did they seem angry?"

"Waal, cunnel, that ar's a difficult question."

"Aha! You're hiding something from me, then."

"Nary hide, cunnel—but—"

"But what? Out with it!"

"Waal, cunnel, they war guilty of a verry onsvil breach of tittikitt, I reckon they calls it, afore leavin'."

"A what?"

"A breach o' tittikitt, cunnel," said the Kentuckian, with a grand air.

"What the devil are you talking about, Jack?" asked Jones, half-mystified, half-amused.

"A breach o' tittikitt, cunnel. What the Frenchers calls a *foi paw*."

The superintendent stared at the station-master a moment in amazement, then, as a light broke in on him, he smiled grimly at the mistake.

"Drop dictionary, Jack. What was this breach of etiquette?"

"Waal, cunnel, ez they rid away, every one of the painted galoots took hold of his snoot, and darned ef they didn't snivel at me, as ef they thunk I war a han'kercher or a barroom towel, and darp thur painted hides, ef I don't spit in the face of the next red hnp I meets, cuss me for a skunk!"

Mr. Hardin delivered this last sentiment with considerable heat. He had been deeply stung by the contemptuous manner of the Blackfeet, and the superintendent could hardly help laughing in his face.

"Never mind, Jack," he said, consolingly. "Your scalp's safe, anyway. Don't be in too much of a hurry to offend Eagle Wing's band. They are dangerous fellows, and may not be on the war-path against us, possibly."

"Darn the difference, cunnel," said the station-master, shrewdly. "A Injun buck on the war-trail ain't apt to stick at trifles. You keep your eyes skinned ef you meet the cusses, that's all I say. One skulp's wuth a dozen bald heads any day, old hoss."

"Keep your advice to yourself, my friend," said Jones, coldly. "I've not required it yet, that I know of. Is that ladder ready, there?"

It was; and a few moments later Hardin was released from his solitary perch, while a party of men entered the building through the scuttle-hole, with crowbars and blacksmith's tools, with which from the inside, they very soon forced the door open.

Then, while the wounded Kentuckian was placed in an ambulance and carried away to Salt Lake City, the rapid, energetic Jones put the station in order once more, with a promptness and celerity which were the grand secrets of his success in managing "The Company's" affairs on the Pony Route.

Twenty men were left to repair the stockade, and form the nucleus of a new station; horses were temporarily secured for the in-coming rider, who was expected from Salt Lake; and the superintendent, with his formidable party of twenty more, galloped off to the next station, to ascertain how far the raid had spread, and what damage was done.

Colonel Sam Jones was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet, or he would not have been General Superintendent U.S. Pony Express. Inside of an hour from the time when Hardin was released, the superintendent was at Guadalupe station, next on the route. He found every thing snug, the horses in their stockaded stable while the station-keeper and mail-rider were on guard with loaded rifles, expecting attacks momentarily. They had heard two bands of Indians pass in the night, and had been unmolested by either.

The superintendent, leaving the rest of his escort to follow at more leisure, took with him only six men, as many as the station could mount, and determined to ride post from station to station, so as to overtake any Indians that might be on the trail, by constant change of horses.

At an hour before noon, he started on the Pony Route.

CHAPTER XIV.

RED AND WHITE FRIENDS.

THE young moon was hanging in the faint luster of her first quarter, over the sharp ridges of the sierra, and lighting up the lovely vicinago of the convent of Santa Clara, on the same night on which the young mail-rider was ambushed, when the thunder of galloping hoofs was heard in the distance, and a band of plumed horsemen, bearing long lances, came riding up from the eastward.

At their head galloped two chiefs, one tall and slender, and resembling a spirit more than a man, for he was appareled in white from sole to crown, and his charger was snow-white. The other was short, broad and sturdy, with glittering medals flashing on his naked breast in the moonlight. He rode a powerful charger, spotted like a jaguar.

Behind the two chiefs came two girls on spotted horses, and fourteen couples of plumed warriors followed in double file.

As they neared the convent, at a signal from Antelope Eye the Echipeta warriors fell into a walk; and the young chief, throwing his bridle to Bear Killer, leaped off his horse, and ran forward, half bending over, to inspect the trail more closely.

Right opposite the gate, he suddenly halted, threw up his hands in warning, and remained as if rooted to the spot, while the band, at the signal, remained stationary.

It was a strong proof of the youth's marvelous skill as a tracker, that such an old and experienced warrior as Bear Killer should have allowed him to head the party so long. It was Bear Killer who now came up, on foot, and demanded:

"What does my son see, that he calls us?"

The boy chief pointed to the ground.

"The blood of dogs," he said.

In the faint light of the moon, a dark patch

was visible where the ground was torn up, the yellow dust clotted and stained with the black pool of dried gore, and all the marks of a contest could be seen.

"The dead have been here," said Bear Killer, sententiously. "Where are they, and who?"

A strong expression of disgust crossed the handsome features of the lad, as he said:

"Utes! They are cowards, skunks. They have not even carried them off."

Beckoning to Bear Killer, he advanced to the silent convent walls.

A deep broad moat surrounded them, and a heavy draw-bridge was raised, to protect the entrance, but no light shone from any opening in the long lofty wall. The convent was silent as the grave.

Antelope Eye pointed into the dark moat, where a ray of moonshine had penetrated, round an angle of the wall.

There lay the carcasses of two horses, already bloated by the heat, and sticking, legs up. By carefully exploring the cavern, three bodies of human beings, Indians all, could be distinguished.

Antelope Eye went to his horse, and took from the saddle-bow a hair lasso, which he silently handed to Bear Killer.

Assisted by the powerful veteran, the lad descended into the moat, and made a long and careful examination.

When he ascended, his face was grave.

"They fought one of the white riders that carry the little black bags," he said. "They slew his horse, and here are the bags from the saddle. He himself is gone into the convent. Three Utes are dead. He was a brave warrior, to kill so many."

Bear Killer took the mail-bags, and examined them curiously. His face was thoughtful. Like Eagle Wing, he knew the importance of keeping peace with the whites, and realized that his own band was in danger of being accused of participation in this outrage.

While he was thoughtfully examining the bags, in doubt what to do, the tramp of horses at full speed was heard from the eastward, and a few minutes later, Colonel Sam Jones, with his six riders, came tearing down toward the convent, at a tremendous pace.

The superintendent checked his speed and halted, the instant he saw the band of mounted Indians. He knew that his fresh horses were able to distance animals that had come the distance for which he had trailed the Blackfeet, but Colonel Sam Jones was too cautious to trust himself within reach of such a formidable party. He and his men hung aloof, revolver in hand, while the superintendent opened a parley with the strangers, in the Ute tongue, for Colonel Sam Jones was an old mountain-man, as well as a college graduate, and had become acquainted with most Indian dialects.

"Who are you, and what are you doing?" he shouted.

It was Bear Killer who waved back his men, stalked out alone on foot, and answered proudly: "Echipeta Kainna. No Ute. The Utes are skunks and toads."

The superintendent was a little puzzled. His old mountain experience had not taught him much of the Blackfoot dialect, which is entirely different from that of the other prairie tribes.

Beyond the name, and a few phrases, he was ignorant, but as he remembered Hardin's account, he began to suspect that the band before him was possibly composed of friends, and that it might be wise to show confidence in them, by meeting their chief half-way.

He walked his horse forward a few steps, and again hailed in Ute:

"Let one chief meet me, and talk, if it is peace."

He had hardly spoken, when Antelope Eye touched Bear Killer's arm.

"Let the squaw chiefs go," he whispered. "They can make peace for us. The pale-faces will not touch squaws."

Bear Killer nodded, and spoke to the girls, who eagerly agreed to explain the case to the white leader. Accordingly, Levrette and Chevrette turned their horses, and rode toward the superintendent, who met them close under the cover of his men's pistols.

Colonel Sam looked suspicious at the fact of more than one Indian coming to meet him, but his suspicions were dissipated by two facts.

First, he saw, at their near approach, that both were women. Second, the rest of the Blackfeet dismounted from their horses, and grouped themselves together, some little way off, as if to convince him that they meant no harm.

The superintendent thrust back his revolver into his holster, half-ashamed of himself, when he saw with whom he was to meet, and advanced, extending both hands, and using the Echipeta salutation:

"How-ne-tuck-a?" (How do you do?)

It was the greater part of his Blackfoot vocabulary.

Two soft palms met his in a frank clasp, and the sweet, rich voices answered together:

"Neet-ahk-se." (Very well, thank you.)

Then Mademoiselle Levrette broke into a silvery laugh, and observed:

"To judge from your attempts, colonel, I should imagine that we might better pursue our conversation in your own tongue, unless you prefer French, so that your men may not understand."

Colonel Sam stared in amazement, ejaculating:

"Heavens and earth, ladies! who are you, and what are doing here?"

"I am Levrette Ledoux, a chief of the Echipeta Kainna," said the girl, in a tone of pride.

"You need not wonder, colonel. Even Indians are sometimes civilized, and we were both educated at the Sacre Cœur of Montreal. What do you seek here?"

"I seek one of my mail-riders, Dick Darling," said Jones, without further disguise. "I fear the worst for the poor lad. If he was on time, I should have met him, two stations back, but they have not heard of him, and I know that Cat's Eye's band is out on the war-path. The brutes burnt Dolores Station last night."

"I know it," said Levrette, gravely. "We are out after them, and trying to save him, but your fool of a station-master would not tell us when he was expected back, so we have been hunting in vain, till now. I fear that Darling is killed."

"What makes you think so, madam?"

"If you will trust yourself with us to examine the convent moat," said Levrette, "we will show you what we have found. Otherwise, we will go on the trail of the Utes again, and trust to your honor to report Eagle Wing's band as friendly to the whites."

Colonel Sam threw aside all suspicion, saying:

"I will trust you, madam. Lead on."

CHAPTER XV.

THE YOUNG WARRIOR'S PROMISE.

THE Superintendent of the Pony Express was a man of stout nerves, but he was fain to shudder slightly, as he inspected, in company with the grave, dignified Blackfoot warriors, the proofs of the barbarous murder that had been done on the mail-rider.

There were many strange circumstances revealed by the light of the lantern which one of Jones's party quickly produced, a small bull's-eye, such as the pony expressman usually carried at night.

Under its powerful light, Antelope Eye made several discoveries, which he pointed out to the girls, who translated his words to the superintendent, quite unconscious that the young chief understood every word.

Then a strange state of facts was developed.

The mail-rider's body was gone, and the three Ute bodies were scalped.

When the superintendent saw this, he at first jumped to the conclusion that some whites had rescued Darling and killed or driven off his enemies. The young Indian's keen intelligence and merciless logic quickly showed him a different state of things.

"See," said Antelope Eye, animatedly, "the three Utes were killed with single shots, and no arrows stick in them. Indians would have shot them full of arrows. The white man killed them. He must have fought hard, under the walls of the big woman's lodge, and the black squaws have taken him in, to bury him. See the broad trail of the Utes, away from here. They went at a walk, for their horses are tired, and drag their feet in the dust. No one has been here since, or there would be tracks. The Utes are skunks and cowards, without heart. They are coyotes that eat their own brethren. They dare not take a man's scalp, so they have taken the scalps of their own dead, after the white man shot them, and thrown the bodies in the ditch."

"But, where then is the white man's body?" asked Jones, wonderingly. "Surely, they must have scalped him, too."

"The white man is in there," said Antelope Eye, confidently, pointing to the silent convent.

"We'll soon see about that," said the colonel, briskly. "Give me that bugle, Jim Morrison."

The man addressed handed his leader a small

cavalry bugle, wherewith the colonel was fond of amusing himself, and the latter blew a lively *reveille* before the door of the convent.

It was repeated twice, with loud variations, before any notice was taken. At last a window opened above the portcullis, and a shrill, querulous voice demanded:

"*Quien llama, caballeros, quien llama?*" (Who calls, gentlemen, who calls?)

"Americans, men of the mail-carrier's route," answered the superintendent, in Spanish. "One of our men has been killed before your door, and we want to know where you have hidden him."

"Go away, senores, in the name of God," said the shrill voice. "This is a house of prayer, where no men are allowed to enter, and we can not tell you. If the poor man who was killed belongs to your people, rest content. He is in holy hands and will receive Christian burial. *Buenos noches.*"

Then came a sharp slam to the window, as Sister Agatha shivered her way back to bed, grumbling at the "*malditos ereticos*," who had aroused her from her slumber.

Colonel Sam Jones uttered, it must be owned, some language by no means complimentary to the old nun, as he growled:

"You may keep your old convent, granny. I don't want it. But where the devil are my mail-bags? That's what I want."

"We found them on poor Darling's saddle," said Chevrette Ledoux. "Bear Killer will give them to you."

It was a great relief to Colonel Sam to find his mail-matter safe. A dead rider might be replaced. Stolen mail-matter the Company was responsible for. Eagerly he clutched the bags and inspected the seals by the light of the bull's-eye. They were intact. Obviously the Indians had not thought it worth while to go through them.

With an air of relief he observed:

"Come, boys, we've no time to lose. Poor Darling's been wiped out, and the convent people will bury him. As for us, we must ride on. Jim Morrison, take Darling's mail back to Hidalgo Station, and carry it on. The track's safe that side. You others come along. We must clear the way to Carson."

As he spoke, he turned away to his horse and mounted.

Chevrette's voice, in deep, rich tones of indignation, demanded:

"And do you mean to say, Mr. Superintendent, that you are going to leave the body of poor Darling to be buried or left by these strangers?"

Colonel Sam shrugged his shoulders.

"Mademoiselle, the affairs of our Company can not come to a halt for a single death. I have my duty to perform, which is to restore our northern route to running order, and I can't spare any more time. Many thanks for your help. Jim Morrison, did you hear my orders? Away, sir."

The mail-rider addressed had been strapping the bags on behind and in front of his saddle, and now he touched his hat, and started off on the back trail.

Colonel Sam Jones removed his hat, and bowed with the utmost politeness to Levrette and her sister, then to the Blackfoot chiefs.

A moment later, with only five followers, he was off at full speed on the Carson trail, to re-establish order on his beloved route.

The Blackfeet, who had been grimly silent during the presence of the whites, now began to discuss their future plans. By the fact of their horses being corn fed, while they carried a day's ration of corn behind the saddle, they had kept them in comparatively good condition, so far, and the superior blood and breeding of the animals themselves promised to bring them up with the stolen chargers of the Utes, before long.

What the course of the latter would be, they easily surmised—a wide and sweeping circuit, and then a return home, so as to give time for any pursuit to tire itself out.

Judging from this well known tendency of all Indians to come back on their own trail in a circle, and noticing that the Utes' trail took a curve to the south at the very gate of the convent, Bear Killer led his troop off to the south-east, through the mountains.

It was the first time he had undertaken the direction of the party, which he had hitherto trusted to the keen sight of Antelope Eye. Striking off through passes well known to the Echipeta warriors, plunging into deep canons, and winding along narrow and precipitous passes, they found themselves at dawn high up among the upper passes of the Sierra, and soon

descried the object of their search, a file of men in the far distant valley of Reese river, slowly and dejectedly trooping along to the south.

Antelope Eye, who was riding near Bear Killer, noticed them first, when they were at least four or five miles off, and dimly visible as specks on the green surface of the valley. He uttered a low hiss like that of a snake, the well-known warning of caution, and instantly halted.

Under the guidance of Bear Killer, the Blackfoot warriors receded in haste behind their horses, and made the animals lie down, to diminish the chances of being seen by their foes, who, however, had their backs turned to them as they went.

Then an animated discussion ensued between the chiefs as to the proper procedure. It was terminated by Antelope Eye, who suddenly developed a determination and power of oratory for which no one had ever given him credit.

In a short, animated speech, he pledged himself, if the warriors would but follow his guidance, to bring them to a spot where he would deliver the Utes into their hands, like rabbits in a net.

"If a single Ute scalp escapes without our leave," he declared, "I will give my own scalp, the scalp of a chief of the Echipeta, to dry in the lodge of a root-digger. I only ask you to follow me this time, for I know where they are going, and I have more wrongs to avenge than any here."

Then he ended with an account of the indignities he had suffered from Cat's Eye and the Utes, and demanded permission to go first, single-handed, and fight his foes, to avenge those indignities.

With one accord the warriors assented to the request, and told him to lead on. The remarkable thing was, that the Echipeta seemed to fear only that their enemies might slip away from them, by some means. Of the imprudence of allowing a single warrior to fight a whole band, as Antelope Eye proposed, they had no thought. For the Utes, single, they entertained a profound contempt. That very contempt it was, that made them so ferociously anxious, lest a single one should escape to tell that he had insulted a maiden of the Echipeta.

As the Utes disappeared round a spur of the mountains, Antelope Eye led his party down a lonely pass into the heart of the Sierra.

CHAPTER XVI. THE HUMAN CORRAL.

CAT'S EYE and Crow's Foot, as perfect a pair of villains as the Great West has often seen, were riding slowly south from the numery of Santa Clara, talking over the death of their late enemy, Dick Darling, and discussing their future prospects, the next morning after their murderous onslaught.

"The young riding chief died like a man," observed Crow's Foot, gravely, "but how are we to get the squaws? The man at the station has roused the country and the soldiers will be after us, with the guns that shoot all day."

Cat's Eye shook his head thoughtfully. Like his friend, he was beginning to realize that one may pay too dear for a whistle.

"We ought to have kept the squaws while we had them," he observed. "The Echipeta are great warriors, and they too may be soon on our track."

"The Echipeta are dogs," said Crow's Foot, savagely. "We can fight them, but the guns that shoot twice who can stand against?"

He referred to the mountain howitzers used by the troops, whose shells were always an object of great dread to the Indians.

"Let my brother listen," said Cat's Eye, cunningly. "The soldiers cannot march as fast as we, and the Echipeta, if on our trail, may be near us now. Let us turn aside to the mountains and hide there. They will follow our trail, and we can ambush and slay them like buffaloes."

Crow's Foot was not loth to assent to the wisdom of the counsel. The horses of the party were completely exhausted, having been ridden for over seventy miles inside of twenty-four hours, and it became evident that a pursuit must take them at a fearful disadvantage.

They were now far out of the track of emigrants, and entering on that wild and unknown stretch of country in south-east Nevada, still unexplored and unknown to the whites.

Against any pursuit from these they were comparatively safe, from their knowledge of the country, but the likelihood of their being followed by the Blackfeet was a different matter.

Hitherto, they had lived at peace with their

grim neighbors, fearing them too much to provoke a collision, but an insult had been offered to the tribe which they had reason to fear might provoke retaliation. Their party only numbered fifteen men all told, for they had lost seven warriors killed, in the contest at Dolores Station and before the convent. Three of those present were slightly wounded, and they were in ill condition for a battle with unknown forces.

Under these circumstances, at Cat's Eye's suggestion, the raiders turned aside out of the valley they were pursuing, the source of one of the tributaries of the Reese river, and entered one of the numerous canons that intersect that range of mountains.

The canon led them winding deviously along through the heart of the range for six or seven miles, the poor, broken-down horses plodding along, with heads down, only partially invigorated by an occasional swallow of water. It then opened into a wide amphitheater, carpeted with luxuriant green grass, surrounded with perpendicular precipices, and from which the only exit was on the opposite side, where the canon continued, narrower than before, to the source of its stream.

Into this sheltered paradise entered the fifteen grim, ferocious-looking brutes who followed Cat's Eye and Crow's Foot, and then for the first time began to show symptoms of mercy to their horses.

With one accord they dismounted, and turned the poor creatures loose, to feed or rest, as they might prefer.

With hardly an exception, the weary brutes threw themselves down on the soft, rich grass, utterly broken down, and not for several minutes did they muster strength to eat as they lay.

But the mustang blood is too staunch and enduring to give way thus forever. Before ten minutes had passed, first one, then another, having plucked away most of the sweet grass round his head, began to roll. Then two rose simultaneously, shook themselves, and began to graze with avidity; and before long, all of the mustangs were up and feeding.

The coach-horses, large, fine-looking animals, with more bone and substance than the largest mustang, were not so easily restored. Only one of them seemed able to feed, lying down, and the rest gave every symptom of an early death, as they lay groaning and panting on the ground.

The raiders themselves were dinnerless and hungry. They had seized no food on their hurried journey, and were sufficiently forlorn.

It was when they were clustered together in the midst of the little valley, gloomily debating the advisability of killing a horse for food, that the sharp war-cry of the Echipeta suddenly rung through the air.

Instead of ambushing the Blackfeet, they found the tables turned on themselves, as thirty Echipeta warriors, on foot, rushed into the arena from the narrow canon beyond, and charged across to the other entrance, without firing a shot. Fifteen remained to guard each exit, and before the scattered Utes could come together and make ready for defense, they were at the mercy of twice their number of warriors, any one of whom was more than a match for their best fighter.

Then a dead silence fell on all the amphitheater, for the Utes did not dare to begin a fight which could have but one issue. They clustered together, dogged and sullen, grasping their weapons to sell their lives dearly, but unwilling to begin.

Cat's Eye was the only coward among them. He was livid with terror, and shook from head to foot, for he felt that his race was run.

It was in the midst of this silent pause that a slight movement occurred among the Blackfeet at the upper end of the valley. Four mounted figures rode out from behind the line and rode boldly and tranquilly forward to the front of the entrapped Utes.

Cat's Eye uttered a groan of dismay, and his bowels seemed to give way, as he recognized, in front, the two girls whom he had but lately insulted, and on one side Bear Killer, the great war-chief of the Echipeta. The slender, boyish figure on the other side he recognized instantly. It was Antelope Eye, whom he had robbed and turned out to starve, seven years before.

The only thing that gave him hope was, that the lad did not seem to know him, and that his handsome young face wore an expression of mildness that was positively seraphic.

But if Antelope Eye looked gentle, Bear Killer was as grim as a statue of cruelty, and Chevrete and Levrette wore an expression of triumphant scorn that boded ill for the Utes.

"So, dogs of root-diggers, skunks of the brushwood," commenced Levrette, in that free and elegant style affected by her and her sister, "the maidens of the Echipeta are to enter the lodges of such as you, are they? Where were the ears of your warriors, that you could not hear the Echipeta horse-hoofs on your trail? We do not crawl, like snakes. Where were your eyes, that ye could not see the Echipeta trail when it crossed yours, or see our scouts watch ye safe into the valley? Go, you are dogs, skunks, not even squaws in war. A squaw of the Echipeta would hide her head in shame to be counted such warriors as you. Ye are pap-pooes, fit to hang up behind a door and suck at a squaw's breast, to learn wisdom. Go!"

To all her taunts not a man in the group answered a word. Only Cat's Eye shrunk down behind Crow's Foot and tried to hide himself, which Chevrete observed, and took her turn at railing, in true squaw style. No one would have ever dreamed that these two young ladies had once been inmates of the *Sacre Cœur* convent, at Montreal, and received what is known as a civilized education. The polish was pretty well rubbed off by their wild desert life, and for the nonce they were thoroughbred Indians.

"See the cowardly Ute slinking behind his brother, like a coyote hiding in the hole of a prairie-dog!" cried the girl, shrilly. "Dog and coward, come out and fall on your knees for mercy, or your heart shall be cut into small pieces and fed to the buzzards."

Trailing like a wounded serpent, in abject submission, the dastardly Ute crawled from the group and flung himself on his face at the feet of Chevrete's horse. He was completely overcome with terror.

The girl pointed at him contemptuously with her whip, and addressed Crow's Foot in his turn:

"You, too, dog! You who were not satisfied with one, but must have two maidens of the Echipeta in your lodge, grovel in the mud and ask for pardon."

It was evident that she calculated on the force that surrounded her to enforce her mandates. In Crow's Foot she found a different foe.

Her words seemed to sting the sluggish Ute to the quick. He uttered a foul epithet in the Ute tongue, dealt Cat's Eye a furious kick as he lay, and shouted:

"Never! Take that, sow of the Echipeta!"

And he flung his knife at her. Then, raising his cocked pistol, he fired full at Bear Killer's broad breast.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BOY CHIEF'S EXPLOIT.

THE Blackfoot chief was not unprepared for such a maneuver. He had his cocked pistol in hand, for he had hardly expected that such an unconditional and absolute surrender as that of Cat's Eye would be general. When Crow's Foot fired, the Echipeta chief was in the act of spurring his horse on him with leveled weapon.

The Ute was just three seconds the quickest, and his bullet struck Bear-Killer in the center of the breast, bringing him down in a moment, dropped from his horse like a stone, while his bullet exploded harmlessly.

The next moment, the hitherto placid and gentle Antelope Eye suddenly became transformed into a living thunderbolt.

Before the sound of Crow's Foot's shot had ceased, the young chief, with a revolver in each hand, was standing on the ground in front of his horse, and firing into the aroused Utes. In allusion to his hitherto bloodless record, he wore a white hunting-shirt and leggings, his hair was covered with white clay, and his face was painted white, while his horse was white as snow.

With his first shot he felled Crow's Foot, pierced through the heart, and the next moment the remaining thirteen Utes were firing at him, madly and confusedly. Like a rock stood Antelope Eye, a pistol in each hand, and his shots pealed out with a regularity and pitiless accuracy that were amazing.

Then were first revealed the fruits of that patient training which the young chief had so long secretly undergone. It had developed, out of a sight abnormally keen, and stoic nerves, a marksman as reliable as a machine, whose every shot told, and whose roving glance detected, at each shot, which was the man to kill! Twelve shots pealed forth in as many seconds, and when Antelope Eye cast the still smoking weapons at the heads of the two remaining men, the ground was covered with dead bodies, and he was still unwounded. With a fierce yell of triumph, the young chief snatched from his

girdle a third revolver, and covered his remaining foes.

But he needed not to shoot.

With a howl of superstitious dismay, both dropped on their knees, holding up their hands for mercy, and Antelope Eye disdainfully beckoned them forward, with his cocked pistol.

Then, for the first time, he withdrew his foot from where it had been planted during the fight, on the neck of the prostrate dastard, Cat's Eye.

The whole thing was over in a quarter of a minute.

One instant was seen a group of sullen, defiant Utes, doggedly grasping their weapons, then came a sudden movement, a succession of red flashes and sharp reports, men falling like ninepins; a silence; and a white figure standing in front of a group of horses, motioning forward two abject, crawling Indians to his feet.

Levrette and Chevrette sat on their horses, gazing at Antelope Eye, in silent wonder and awe-stricken admiration. The quiet, graceful boy had become, at a bound, the greatest warrior of his tribe. Single-handed, he had slain twelve men, and conquered three more.

The Blackfeet at the end of the valley, while equally amazed, were equally silent. Only Bear Killer, the tough old warrior, who had just staggered to his feet in spite of his fearful wound, uttered a faint cry of triumph.

It was in the midst of a deep silence, that Antelope Eye motioned to the two cowards to drop their pistols, which they did.

"Draw your knives," he said, sternly, "scalp the slain, and bring me the scalps here."

With humble alacrity, but shuddering all over, the unhappy wretches complied with the grim order, and delivered their tale of scalps to the implacable Nemesis, developed in the beautiful boy.

Without a word, Antelope Eye shot them both down at his feet when their task was done, and then gave a disdainful kick to the prostrate Cat's Eye.

"Up, dog of a Ute," he said, scornfully. "Scalp your brothers, and lay all the scalps at my feet, tied in a bundle."

Quivering from head to foot, the dastard obeyed, and was confronted by the awful fury that now at last began to work in the features of the boy chief.

"Ha, Dog, Skunk, Toad of the Utes!" hissed Antelope Eye. "Crawling reptile of the sagebrush! do you remember me now? When three Ute braves found one boy of the Echipetas, they stole on him in his sleep, robbed him, and turned him out naked on the prairie, in the snow, to die. But he found his way home, trapped rabbits with the hairs of his head, to feed him on the way, and swore vengeance on you and your accursed tribe. They are gone; but you live, and shall live, till you pray for death, swine and toad of an unclean mother!"

As he spoke, he spit on the degraded chief, and turned away.

Picking up the bundle of Ute scalps, Antelope Eye's manner changed in an instant, as he spoke softly and proudly to Levrette:

"The task is done. A warrior offers the scalps of fourteen Utes, and claims his reward. The maidens will enter the lodge of the youngest chief of the Echipeta."

Levrette bowed her head low.

"The choice remains with the chief," she said.

"The maidens of the Echipeta will keep their word, for Antelope Eye is a great chief."

Here a deep, guttural voice broke in on the colloquy. It was that of Bear Killer, who stood close by, bearing with the wonderful physical fortitude and strength of an Indian, a wound that would have left a white man helplessly groaning on his back.

"No longer Antelope Eye," said the veteran, gravely. "My son is no more a boy. He has become a man among men. From henceforth the tribe shall know only *Wau-skeen-ska*—White Thunder, the chief; for he was white as the mountain snow, and deadly as the thunder of Wahcondah."

And as White Thunder the young chief was known from that moment, not only in his own tribe, but among all his neighbors.

White Thunder it was, who turned disdainfully away once more to the kneeling Ute, crouched humbly at his feet, his eyes imploringly fixed on the young chief, while his quivering lips begged for mercy.

"Strip off your clothes, coward," said White Thunder, sternly. "A coyote should not wear the hide of a warrior. Strip."

Without venturing on an expostulation, the abject Ute complied with the order, throwing down his clothes with servile haste.

White Thunder sprang on his horse, and beckoned to the Blackfeet at the other end of the valley. A number of them ran forward, obeying his gesture as if he had been their head warrior. His recent wonderful exploit had impressed them with such admiration, that, for the time, White Thunder was omnipotent.

Under his orders, the wounded Bear Killer was placed upon a litter, hastily constructed of lances and blankets, and carried slowly away to the exit of the valley, to undertake the home journey.

Then the remaining chiefs mounted their horses, and for the first time the degraded Ute, Cat's Eye, was brought into public notice. There he stood, or rather crouched, a little way off, stripped to the skin, and evidently dreading the worst, from the ominous silence preserved about him, up to that time.

White Thunder pointed at the shivering coward, such a rare exception to his stoic race, and said to the chiefs:

"Behold the dog that stole on a boy of the Echipetas in his sleep with three dogs like himself, stripped him naked and turned him out. A warrior dies by steel and bullet. A dog is lashed to death. I have said."

It needed no further hint.

The Blackfeet, like all Indians, carry short, buffalo-hide whips, with a pointed thong that cuts like a knife. At the words of White Thunder, they uttered a yell of mingled scorn and fierce delight, and galloped down on the unhappy wretch.

Cat's Eye knew what was coming. Goaded to desperation, he turned and fled like a deer to the upper entrance of the valley, hoping to reach it before pursuit could arrest him.

Behind him scoured the Echipeta, yelling like a pack of hounds, and soon came up with him. Then the cruel sport commenced, as one chief, measuring his distance with pitiless accuracy, caught the flying Ute with the end of his lash, taking a small piece of flesh out of his back, and giving way to another who repeated the operation. They did not attempt to intercept his flight, but before he reached the narrow canon, he had received twenty-five such lashes, under each of which he howled piteously like a whipped dog, and his back and thighs were covered with blood. The torture, however, seemed only to lend him additional strength, for he managed to gain the canon at last, where only a single horseman could follow him, and up its rocky bed he darted in haste, where the proud chiefs disdained to follow him.

Laughing scornfully at his cowardice, they rode slowly back to where White Thunder calmly awaited them, and took up their return march to camp.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PATIENT AND NURSE.

IN a large, dimly-lighted room, deliciously cool in contrast with the hot, suffocating glare of the sun outside, lay stretched on a couch, the form of a young man, his face pinched, pale and haggard, a beard of a month's growth on his chin, his long hair in tangled curls spread over the pillow. He lay there, hardly seeming alive, as he had lain ever since the hot delirium and fever of his wounds had subsided, three days before.

Few would have recognized in that sallow, haggard face the once dashing, handsome young mail-rider, who had been left for dead at the gates of the convent of Santa Clara, a month since.

The nuns had hurried out when the Indians were gone, and picked him up, under the direction of old Padre Junipero. They had brought him into the infirmary, thinking him dead, and intending to lay him out and give him Christian burial.

It was only when he was covered with the sheet, that the little novice, Francesca, who had been remarkably quiet and pale, never uttering a word during the whole scene, stole to his side, and presently uttered a loud shriek.

All the nuns were amazed. No one had ever known the child to exhibit excitement before. Usually, she was remarkably quiet and placid. At her cry they all came running back, and were amazed when told by her, panting and trembling with excitement, that the young cavalier was alive. *She could hear his heart beat.*

Old Padre Junipero was appealed to, as the medical authority of the convent, and he, after a long and careful examination, pronounced that La Chiquita was right. The youth was alive, but, from the wounds he had received, could not probably live more than another hour or two.

But here again La Chiquita amazed her

friends. She actually had the courage to tell Padre Junipero to his face that he didn't know what he was talking about.

"How can you, father, when you have not examined him? His clothes are all clotted with blood, but you have not seen his wounds. He must not die. He *shall not die!* I'll nurse him. Quick, cut off his clothes, and wash these wounds. You ought to be ashamed to let a fellow Christian perish before your eyes."

And La Chiquita, trembling with excitement, and somewhat resembling an enraged dove, stamped her little foot and began to cry.

Padre Junipero looked as much aghast, as a shepherd might if a small lamb were suddenly to butt him in the stomach.

He looked confused, but at once busied himself to restore the insensible youth.

The older nuns, most of whom had been mothers in their time, and had taken the veil in old widowhood, hustled La Chiquita away, to her amazement, for the child was absolutely and entirely innocent as to the reason of their conduct, and then cut off the clothes of the poor wounded lad, and washed away the blood with great gentleness, while Padre Junipero examined the wounds.

We have said that the old priest is the medical authority of the convent, but in fact his knowledge was of the slightest, and chiefly confined to such simple remedies as he had picked up during a long mission life among the Indians, from their old medicine-men.

In treating the injured man, he probably did the best that could have been done, which was to bind up his wounds, pour some spirits down his throat, and leave him to nature for recovery. The wounds that Dick Darling had received were many and severe, but there was one circumstance in his favor, that no bullets had lodged. From the short distance at which they had been fired, every one had gone entirely through limb or body.

Only one had penetrated the body, and that one was in the right breast; there were holes through each arm, and one through the left thigh, besides at least a dozen gashes, where bullets had plowed up the flesh in various parts.

Cut and hacked to pieces, as he was to all seeming, no vital part had been touched, owing to the suddenness and rapidity of the short contest, at the full speed of galloping horses.

The mail-rider had succumbed to loss of blood and the shock of so many bullets striking him, and there seemed to be but little chance of life for him, so completely exhausted was he.

The fiery aguardiente, or brandy, which was poured down his throat, was the first thing to revive him. Under its influence he choked and opened his eyes, and tried to speak.

The old priest gently bid him lie still, and the poor fellow, after one wondering glance at the nuns, closed his eyes again.

From that moment he was watched over by priest and nuns alike, with the most kindly solicitude, and as day after day went by, and he still lived, even Padre Junipero began to entertain hopes of his ultimate recovery.

As for La Chiquita, the child, from that first moment in which she had found his heart beating, seemed to be quite confident and content. When every face was gloomy, she insisted on watching at his bedside, giving him the soup and brandy that were slowly administered, from time to time, by spoonfuls, and so literally keeping him alive from day to day.

The old nuns, who were growing lazier and more selfish than the enthusiastic novice, were quite willing to resign the post to her. She was not yet a professed nun, and had six months of her novitiate to go through. Moreover, Francesca was the daughter of a rich hacienda, who had lately died, leaving her an immense fortune, and to get that fortune for the convent of Santa Clara, it was necessary to make the Senorita Francesca de Ribera into a nun, which could only be done by keeping her in good temper.

Hitherto, the little girl had been an enthusiastic devotee, longing for the day to come on which she should take the veil. If the nuns made the convent disagreeable to her, there was no telling how soon she might leave them; for they were well aware that her family, and especially her brother, who owned half the hacienda, were by no means anxious to see their father's property clutched by any religious body.

So La Chiquita found herself, by common consent, installed as head nurse over the poor wounded mail-driver.

Not that there seemed any danger to her in the fact. Contrary to the ordinary romantic notions on the subject, a man desperately wound-

ed is not a pleasant patient, and as time goes on, becomes positively offensive to delicate nerves. Poor Dick Darling, haggard and unshorn, with prominent cheek-bones and glaring eyes, amid a forest of frowsy, tangled hair, was very different from the Dick Darling who rode out, trim and handsome from Dolores Station. As his numerous wounds began to suppurate in that sultry climate, the odor became very sickening, and altogether, while an object of the greatest pity, there was nothing attractive or in any way romantic about him.

Here he had been, lingering between life and death, for a full month, when at last the fever and delirium subsided, and he lay there, as we found him at the beginning of our chapter, inexpressibly weak, but on the road to recovery.

And beside him, in the cool, dark infirmary, with her white hood drawn forward over her face, but watching the sleeper furtively, while a gentle smile of ineffable content wreathed her lips, sat La Chiquita, telling her beads slowly.

Dick Darling suddenly opened his eyes, and they met hers.

"Who are you?" he asked, faintly, "and what is this place?"

CHAPTER XIX.

AN IDYL.

LA CHIQUITA turned on her patient with a severe and magisterial air. She did not understand a word he said, Spanish being her only tongue, but she conceived that he was questioning her. She put her finger on her lip, and said, with an assumption of authority that was very ludicrous in one so childishly beautiful:

"*Es menester que tu no hables chico.*" (You must not speak, little one.)

Dick Darling stared in wonder, and a faint smile crossed his lips.

It was the first return to absolute sense, since his wounds. Like all Californians, he understood some Spanish, and more than most of them.

It was with a very humble air that he said:

"*Ah, senorita, quiere usted me decir en donde yo soy? No hablara mas, si yo lo supiera.*" (Ah, miss, will you tell me where I am? I would not talk any more, if I knew it.)

La Chiquita smiled, but held up her finger reprovingly.

"You are in the convent of Santa Clara, among friends. You were hurt before our gates, and have been very ill. I am Sister Francesca, your nurse; and you must be very obedient, or I shall go away and leave you, for Padre Junipero says you must not talk. Now lie still. I am going to give you some food, you poor child, and then you must go to sleep."

It was interesting to note the commanding and motherly air with which the little novice addressed her patient. To see her repair to the little soup-saucepan which was simmering in a corner of the room over a little lamp, pour some into a basin and approach the patient, was a wonderful sight in itself.

With her brow puckered in a thoughtful frown, and her rosy lips compressed in an expression of anxious importance, she proceeded to administer the said soup to the wounded man with scrupulous care.

When a drop ran down his chin she scolded him gently for his carelessness, and abashed the poor youth so that he choked over the next mouthful, and a spasm of pain seized him.

Then the severe little nurse dropped her dignity and became dreadfully frightened, till Dick ceased to gasp for breath and lay back, exhausted, when she began to cheer him up once more, and pet him as if he was a little child.

At last, with an innocent unconsciousness that showed that she must have frequently done it before, she softly dropped a kiss on his forehead, and told him to go to sleep or she would leave him.

Dick obeyed orders with marvelous docility. It is surprising how much more influence is exerted by a beautiful nurse than an ugly one.

He lay back and fell asleep, dreaming that he was wandering in the shady bowers of Paradise, and that a bevy of angels surrounded him and carried him off, of which every one wore the serious Madonna face of Francesca de Ribera.

When Dick woke again it was quite dark, the room was chilly, a small night light burned near the bed, and he felt shivering and decidedly hungry.

In the great wicker chair by the bed sat a solemn black figure, bowed over and hunched up, very different from the slender figure of Francesca in its white robes.

Dick lay staring at it for a few minutes, in doubt whether it were not merely a change of dream. He perceived the wrinkled face of a fat old woman encircled by a white bandage like that of a corpse, while the rest of her body was enveloped in somber black. The old nun had fallen asleep with her nose on her breast and was snoring and wheezing away in peaceful unconsciousness.

The young man stirred and tried to raise himself, finding, in the operation, that he was absolutely unable to turn in bed. He was free from pain while he lay still, but when he moved either arm he was sensible that he was more or less damaged—how, he had quite forgotten. The past seemed but a dream to him, since he left Carson on his return trip. He had a faint memory of a confused Indian fight, and that was all.

Now, however, the discomfort of his position, for he was weak and cold and hungry, made him irritable. He began to call out as loud as he could, which was little above a whisper, and the old nun suddenly gave a start and snort of affright and woke up.

Once awake she soon made him comfortable, for, like all old nuns, she was a trained nurse. She threw a soft warm cotton quilt over the bed to warm him, fed him skillfully with soup, and talked to him all the while in the comforting, motherly strain that good nurses assume to their weak patients.

Dick, at first inclined to be sulky about his change of nurses, soon became reconciled to the change, ate a hearty supper of thick soup, and slept like a top, till next noon, when he woke, refreshed and voracious.

To his inexpressible satisfaction, Sister Francesca was there by his bedside; and when he awoke, she bent over and kissed him again, just as innocently as if he was a child, while she talked to him in the same low, soothing manner as the old nun, which in such a young girl had something inexpressibly and funnily charming.

Dick Darling, it must be confessed, took unfair advantage of his position as a patient that morning. He put on airs, and made himself out worse than he was. The real fact was, that he felt quite free from pain, clear in head, and very hungry. He was able to move his arms, though not to turn his body. He pretended that he needed raising up, his pillows arranged, etc., etc., that he might have the pleasure of feeling the soft arms of the little novice round him. He was so much reduced in weight that she had no difficulty in moving him. Then he demanded to sit up and be propped up with pillows while he took his breakfast, and kept Sister Francesca waiting patiently, spoon in hand, for at least twenty minutes, while he slowly enjoyed the meal that he pretended to be unable to swallow.

At last he grew ashamed of himself for his tyranny, and when the little novice came to lay him down again he caught hold of her white hand and kissed it fervently, saying:

"God bless you, Sister Francesca. You are an angel."

The little novice blushed ever so slightly, but she smiled with an air of calm protection, as she said:

"You must not excite yourself, child, or Padre Junipero will scold. Now you must go to sleep."

But Dick suddenly became rebellious and demurred. He wanted to talk and ask some questions. He was growing nervous, he said. He could not sleep. He would not sleep. He felt the fever coming on. She must talk and tell him how he came there, or he might grow worse.

Little Sister Francesca, yielding by nature, was frightened into a quick compliance. Her patient had already discovered that he was the master there, and, man-like, used the power. The little novice did not know her own heart yet. The handsome cavalier that had caused it to flutter, a month before, had disappeared, as it were, swallowed up in the past, as if he had never been. The poor haggard patient before her was quite a distinct being, to whom she felt a sort of motherly protecting love, that seemed to her perfectly innocent and commendable.

Insensibly to herself, she fell into a long conversation with Dick, wherein he lay quiet, asking an occasional question, while she talked on, in her low sweet tones of voice, telling him how she saw the terrible fight before the convent walls, and how bravely the cavalier fought, ere he was shot down.

She described it, as if he had been another person, for she had evidently forgotten that the man lay beside her, and her face glowed with

enthusiasm as she told of the battle. Then, when she came to tell of his sufferings, and how she first found that he was alive, her eyes filled with tears, and insensibly she found herself holding Dick's hand and petting it softly, as she described the long struggle between life and death.

When Padre Junipero looked into the sick room one hot afternoon about six weeks later, on his medical visit, what should he see but his innocent little novice La Chiquita, sitting beside his patient's couch in a most endearing attitude, cooing away like a dove to her mate, while the American lay back on his pillows, with his hollow eyes gleaming with light, and a soft happy smile irradiating his face. It was a clear case of love.

"*AHEM!*" said Padre Junipero, as he looked at them.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SIRENS.

WHEN Padre Junipero uttered that vigorous cough, La Chiquita started violently, and looked up.

Then, as she caught the severe glance of the old priest, she suddenly turned deep crimson, and covered her face with her hands, trembling from head to foot.

Her eyes were opened at last.

As for Dick Darling, he turned round on the priest with very different feelings. Ten weeks' repose and the best of food had made a great change in the wounded man. Early that morning, Dick had risen from his couch alone and unassisted, when Sister Agatha, whose turn it was to watch, was snoring in her chair.

He had made several discoveries when he came to stand: first, that his arms and other flesh wounds were almost well; second, that the hole in his right breast was filled up; third, that although he was very weak, he could walk, without any trouble.

It was in the full triumph of these discoveries that he had returned to his couch, determined to make an effort to get out, for he was tired of his imprisonment among the old nuns.

It was only when Sister Francesca came, as she always did about an hour before noon, to assume her post, that Dick began to reconsider his determination. After all, there were worse positions than being petted by a little nun with the face of a Madonna.

And so, somehow, their conversation that morning had gradually taken a confidential character, as the young mail-rider began to ask questions about convent life, and the novice had told him of her determination to take the veil at the end of the year.

And then Dick had implored her not to do it, for his sake, and had begun to coax her, though still without daring to declare the love that really burned in his breast.

And La Chiquita, still innocent of what she was coming to, had admitted that of late, the convent duties had begun to be irksome to her, and that her brother Gonzalo did not want her to be a nun; and finally, won by Dick's entreaties, she consented to think over leaving the convent, and returning to the world, while the mail-rider, who, as we have discovered, was a person of considerable refinement and education, for all his rough calling, pictured to her how happy he should be, after his trips, to be able to visit her at her hacienda near Santa Barbara.

It was while describing the future to each other in glowing colors, though still without any word of love or marriage, that Padre Junipero came in and found La Chiquita prattling away, while she patted and played with Dick's listless hand, in a manner that had become habitual with her, when petting her patient.

But the old priest's "*AHEM!*" opened the eyes of the lovers in a moment. While La Chiquita quivered with shame and confusion, Dick turned fiercely upon Padre Junipero.

"It is usual for gentlemen to knock at the door when they enter a sick-room," he said. "You have frightened the lady and me, father."

"Be content, my son," said the priest, dryly. "This is no longer a sick-room, I find. You are growing well, perhaps too well. Pachita, my child, you will come to confession at three this afternoon. Meantime, you can send Sister Agatha here."

Dick rose up in bed.

"Stay here, senorita," he said, firmly. "Padre Junipero has no right to control you, for you have just promised me not to take the veil."

"Oh, no, no, Ricardo, I did not quite promise," murmured La Chiquita, brokenly, while Padre Junipero opened his eyes very wide.

Then Dick gave convincing proof that he was quite well and as firm and determined as ever. He suddenly gathered the little novice to his heart and confronted the amazed priest with glowing eyes.

"Padre Junipero," he said, boldly, "you see she loves me and I love her. You can not have this novice for a nun, for she is to be my wife. That is the reason, is it not, Pachita?"

Pachita made no answer. She did not even stir. When she heard those terribly bold words of Dick, and thought of facing the old nuns, the poor little thing was completely overcome with a rush of conflicting emotions, shame, terror and a deep sense of guilt, in consequence of feeling a certain thrill of joy, that she was certain she ought not to feel.

What with all these, and feeling that the eye of Padre Junipero was fixed on her, lying thus in the arms of a man, without struggling, poor Pachita fainted dead away in Dick's arms.

Dick did not know this, for the novice's face was hid in his breast, and he felt that her silence implied consent. He turned his language to English, which the priest spoke well.

"You see, father," he said, "she loves me. You may as well give up, and marry us. Her family will help her out of this, if they won't let her marry an American. Come, which is best, to lose her to them or to me?"

"To them, undoubtedly, senor," said the priest, coldly. "Your proposition to me is base, or you would speak it, so as to let Pachita comprehend."

Dick gathered Pachita closer to his breast with a careless hug.

"Don't you worry, father, about her. She knows as well as I that her family won't let her marry me willingly. At the same time, once married, they can not separate us, and if you perform the ceremony, you will be our friend, and earn our gratitude."

Padre Junipero hesitated. Like all priests of whatever denomination, he had a keen eye for the dollars, and Dick's words implied a handsome reward.

While he was thus musing over the question, he turned abruptly away to the window and looked absently out, on the hot, glaring, dusty landscape, outside. Something he saw there, under the convent walls, disturbed his thoughts.

In front of the gateway, and looking up at the window, were two women, of magnificent brunette beauty, with long, satin-like tresses of black hair, gathered together on the back of the head, and falling in showers behind. The two women were gorgeously dressed in the style of Indian warriors on the war-path, wearing leggings of velvet loaded down with gold lace, while their necks, arms and bosoms were loaded with necklaces, medals, chains, bracelets, and every other sort of ornament, in a marvelously picturesque mingling of civilized and savage adornment.

Each girl wore the head-dress, only worn by the highest chiefs of the Echipeta and Upsaroka tribe, composed of a crest of feathers at least two feet high, on the head of a tiger-cat, the whole fastened to the hair and blending with it, gradually sloping off and falling nearly to the ground behind.

The priest was so much amazed at these women warriors, who sat on their spotted chargers, bristling with revolvers, and looking straight at him, that he was compelled to mumble a *pater noster* to himself before he could get his senses fully.

There the two beautiful, wicked-looking creatures sat, like leopards of the forest, lithe, beautiful and dangerous, looking straight at Padre Junipero.

Then one of them put up her finger and beckoned to the padre, with a soft smile that was irresistibly captivating.

Padre Junipero crossed himself piously, and repeated the invocation against evil spirits. He had seen Indians and squaws by hundreds, dirty degraded creatures, whose appearance created nothing but disgust; but such beings as this he had never seen.

Cleopatra in her glory might have looked so and less beautiful; and although Padre Junipero crossed himself devoutly and repeated the exorcism once more, it was no use. Try as he might, he could not help looking, and the world within him was stronger than all his prayers and resolutions!

Finally, Padre Junipero gave in bodily. The alluring siren on the left hand, kept smiling and beckoning him down, and he could stand it no more; so out of the sick-room, down the corridor, past all the cells where the nuns were taking their noonday siesta, he passed till he

came to the little postern door that opened out on the moat.

Here, as he expected, he found the two strange, mysteriously-beautiful women, waiting for him, and was greeted with the salutation, in low tones:

"Good father, will you not let us in? We wish to speak to you."

Padre Junipero trembled.

"My daughters, I dare not. If the nuns were to hear of my admitting women, dressed as you are, I should be disgowned in a fortnight."

The one who had spoken laughed a low, melodious laugh.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RED LORD AND MASTER.

THE two girls, with a gesture full of grace, caught up from where they fell over the horses' croups, behind, two rich scarlet-cloth blankets, bordered with gold, and very different from the usual envelope of an Indian. With a careless flirt, each threw her mantle over her shoulders, and sat there, muffled from head to foot in scarlet.

"There, father, are we presentable now?" asked the one who had not hitherto spoken, in very pure Spanish. "The holy sisters may call us Nuns of the Sierra, if they like. Besides, they are all asleep. There will be time for us to have our little talk with you, before they awake."

Padre Junipero hesitated. There was something in the actions, if not the words of these mysterious women, that made his heart beat like a small earthquake. They sat there, smiling bewitchingly at him, and alluring him to let them in, for what purpose he could not tell, but somehow he found himself wishing them in, and that the moat was not so broad.

In a few moments the plank was pushed across, and Padre Junipero, fat, jolly, and rosy, beckoned for the two women-warriors to cross.

As soon as it was fairly across, one of the women leaped down, and held it secure, while her sister, driving her long lance into the ground, tied both horses to the yet quivering weapon, and leaped off in her turn. Then both women stole lightly over the bending plank to the narrow postern.

Once inside, the door was hastily slammed to, and Padre Junipero felt a pair of soft, rounded arms thrown round his neck. But what is the reason that the clasp of those arms suddenly closes so tightly? What is the reason that one of these mysterious women, standing higher than Padre Junipero (who is a short, fat man), suddenly whirls round behind him, the other in front, while both hug him tightly in their arms.

Padre Junipero finds the arm of the woman behind under his chin, pressing against his throat with throttling force, the woman in front seizes his wrists and brings them together with a low laugh; he hears a click, feels something hard encircling his wrists, realizes that he is handcuffed, and at the same moment the perfidious beauty in front raises one little mocasined foot, and plants a vigorous kick right over the place where Padre Junipero's food is supposed to lie, before digestion.

It was a very cruel thing to do, but it answers the woman's purpose. With a low groan, cut short by pain, the father confessor slips down on the floor, completely powerless.

"Quick, Levrette, the lasso," says the lively lady, so dexterous with her feet.

"Never mind," says the more stately Levrette. "Here's an empty cell. Shove him in and lock him up."

No sooner said than done. Each girl takes an arm, and they drag the groaning priest down the corridor to a dark cell-hole, where they throw him into some unknown depth. They hear him go bump, bump, on some stone steps, and Levrette says, giggling:

"It's the wine-cellar, I believe, Chevie. He won't hurt. Let's bolt him in."

The door is bolted, top and bottom, and then the two girls steal back to the postern, laughing at the success of their trick.

Levrette looks out and gives a low whistle. It is answered from the old ruined stable that had contained the assassins of Dick Darling. A moment later, a tall, slender chief, whose costume is identical with that of the two girls, and equally magnificent in material, while his handsome face is guiltless of paint, comes galloping out to the postern, leaps from his horse, and crosses the swaying plank with active step.

"You called me; I am come," he says, in the deep, musical tones of an Indian.

It was a grand sight to see the two that stood in the convent corridor, the tall, stately chief, with his serene, aquiline face, towering above the glorious beauty of the two French-Indian Amazons. From the way in which they twined about him, it was easy to see that White Thunder's lodge was not yet disturbed by jealousy, and that Levrette and Chevrette adored him. Warrior girls as they were, with the privilege of bearing arms and riding on the chase with the chief, they were subdued to softness at his side, whose prowess they had witnessed.

"What is it that my singing-birds desire?" he again asked, in his caressing manner.

"Listen," said Levrette, softly. "Before we knew how true was the aim of White Thunder, and before we were bought with the scalps of our foes, we both knew a youth, who rode for the great father in the East. He was a boy, but we both loved him, not as we love White Thunder, but still passing well. He was slain by the Utes in front of this building, as the black squaws say, but we do not believe it, and we are going to find out whether they lied or not. Is it good?"

"It is good," said White Thunder, gravely. If the man lives, he is a brave warrior, who killed three Utes single-handed. Lead on."

"He is not dead," said Chevrette. "The squaws who bring fish to the convent told me that they have a sick man here, and it must be our Darling."

"Yes," said Levrette, "and the black squaws are keeping him a prisoner, because they have no man in the convent."

White Thunder frowned.

"It shall not be. A brave man is not to be mewed in a cell, or burrowed like a woodchuck. Let us take him out."

"Agreed," cried Levrette and Chevrette together.

Then the three Indians, all appareled as warriors on the war-path, and all so strangely beautiful, stole swiftly and noiselessly along the convent corridors.

Soon they came to the rows of cells, with half-open doors, where the nuns lay taking their siesta in a ghastly mockery of death, for each nun lay in her coffin, according to the rules of the order, and the bandages around their faces gave them the appearance of corpses in cements.

Levrette and Chevrette were used to this sight, from their early convent experience as children, but White Thunder seemed very much impressed with the spectacle of the confined nuns.

The two girls, as they passed each door, shot the bolts quietly on the outside, and thus had the happiness, in a very short time, of locking up forty-three nuns and the Reverend Mother, all snoring away in peaceful unconsciousness.

The nuns being secured against giving any alarm, the two girls dropped the caution they had hitherto displayed.

"There can be no more, Chevie," said Levrette, in French. "You remember how all the sisters slept in a row at the Sacre Cœur. All we have to do is to find the Infirmary now. Our Darling's there if he's alive."

"He is alive," said White Thunder, speaking for the first time in his life in the language he had so long secretly understood. "He lives, and we shall find him. Then, if you wish him to live, keep away from him, for White Thunder is not a fool."

Had a thunderbolt fallen, the two girls could not have been more utterly crushed and astounded than when the young chief, for the first time, gave evidence that he understood what they had been saying. Had it not been for an uncontrollable spasm of jealousy at hearing his wives speaking so familiarly and lovingly of Dick Darling before his very face, White Thunder might have kept his secret. The two girls, never yet restrained by any necessity of prudence, any more than young men, on account of their perfect freedom in the tribe, had become, as we have seen, as wild as young colts at pasture, full of animal spirits, queens of the desert, and unused to control themselves. The Black-foot chiefs they despised, as mental inferiors; the coarse whites, like Hardin, for their manners. Dick Darling was the only man they had seen who could talk to them of the world, and who was not, like Colonel Sam Jones, of a class too high to marry an Indian woman. In this matter of blood, the sting of humiliation that they had often felt in the East, and which, more than any thing else, had driven them from civilization to the wilderness, merely rendered their haughtiness more ineffable. The sneer of "half-

breed" had driven them from the cities, where people would not associate on terms of equality with the half-Indian daughters of a French hunter. Stung by these taunts, the girls had fled to the Echipeta lodges, to find themselves queens of all around. What wonder that they found the contrast a pleasant one, and countervailing all the loss of luxuries, in the vigorous health and rude happiness of the desert.

White Thunder's sudden revelation, and the stern, menacing look of his face, awakened both of these wild, giddy, thoughtless, but by no means bad girls, to a sense of their position, and their eyes fell in shame before the face of the man that they suddenly recognized to be *their master*.

Levrette and Chevrette fell on their knees and embraced those of the stern young chief, who looked down on them like a bronze statue of Justice.

"Oh, my lord and husband!" cried the former, excitedly, "had you but told us you knew of the great world, we should have adored you entirely. Fear not. All the white men in the great East are nothing to my brave chief and husband."

CHAPTER XXII.

STRANGE WOOING.

THERE was no mistaking the earnestness of Levrette. The magnificent girl, gifted with a passionate nature, was obviously sincere in her love and devotion.

As White Thunder looked down on her, his countenance softened, and Levrette, whose eyes were fixed on his, saw the look, and instantly sprung up and hung on the chief's neck, whispering:

"Indeed, I love thee, my hero chief."

Chevrette seemed then, for the first time, to feel that something was wrong, as she gazed on her sister in the arms of the chief, and noticed that neither of them seemed to think of her. Then flashed on her mind the memory of that law of Christianity, which she had heard as a child and had almost forgotten among the polygamous Indians. White Thunder had made his choice, and it was not she. Nominally his wife, Levrette was his real love, and she saw it and trembled with jealousy.

Then suddenly a thought came to her mind—the thought of Dick Darling. If Levrette loved White Thunder, she could love Dick, and at that thought she suddenly turned and fled noiselessly away toward the Infirmary, leaving White Thunder and Levrette to talk in low, loving tones, while the chief told her his secret vow, never to claim the rights of an Indian husband till he should find which of the girls really loved him; for White Thunder, in his silent, self-contained way, had imbibed a number of civilized notions, and among others, the strange idea of love, in a sense entirely un-Indian.

Chevrette fled away down the corridor, silent as a ghost, and guided by her old Montreal experience, made her way to the Infirmary.

Softly opening the low door, she heard the sound of voices in earnest conversation, and beheld the object of her search, Dick Darling, looking very pale and thin, but, if possible, handsomer than ever. His face had been shaved at last, his long, curling hair was in good order, and flowed down over a long, black coat, one of Padre Junipero's cassocks, in fact, which sat awkwardly on his frame, but the only garment procurable, the nuns having burnt up his blood-stained uniform when they cut it off him, as he lay, to all appearances, dying.

But what caused Chevrette the greatest surprise was that the young man had a female companion.

A young girl, in the white flannel robes of a novice, but with her rich hair falling over her shoulders in confusion, the disfiguring hood being removed, was lying in Dick's arms, and the young man was murmuring soft, endearing Spanish words to her.

"*Mi querida Pachita! Anjel de mi alma!* Never shall you replace that hideous hood again, while Ricardo is here to protect you. Let who will come. Padre Junipero shall marry us, and we will be happy. Your brother will relent, when he finds that we are safely married, and I shall rise high yet in our Golden State. Do you not believe it?"

"*Mi Ricardo*, I believe you can do anything," said the soft voice of La Chiquita, fondly, as she raised her lips to meet his. "My riches—I never prized them till now—but they will enable you to follow a career worthy of your blood and education, *querido*; and I shall be proud of you when you get in Congress and make great speeches."

Dick laughed.

"Little flatterer! Well, we love each other. That is the main point. For the rest, I must get out of this place quickly, or you can not follow me, unless Padre Junipero will marry us."

"That he never shall," cried Chevrette, suddenly rushing forward, with a sort of strangled shriek of fury and jealousy. "You that love a wax doll better than a sister of warriors, see your doll spoiled."

As she spoke she whipped out a pistol, aimed at Francesca's head, and was about to fire, when Dick suddenly rushed between, and interposed his own body, while Francesca dropped senseless on the floor.

"Fire here, if you must, Chevrette," cried the youth, sternly. "I never said I loved you. You and your sister plagued me to death, but I never gave you more than civility. Fire away, if you must, but at me, not at this innocent lady."

Chevrette had stood glaring at him, her bosom panting and heaving with fury, her frame half-crouched, like a tiger ready to spring. A moment later, she rushed round to kill the girl, and pulled the trigger just as he caught her arm. The bullet rebounded against the wall, and a moment later he was struggling with the frenzied woman for the pistol, which she tried to use on poor Pachita.

In the excitement, neither noticed loud shouts outside the convent, but a moment later White Thunder and Levrette dashed into the room.

The chief made but one stride to Chevrette's side as she was breaking away from the exhausted Darling. He laid his iron grasp on her wrist and dragged her to one side of the room with his other hand on her throat, shaking her as a chief treats his squaw.

"Is White Thunder a coyote, that the Fawn throws dirt on his robe?" he thundered, in his guttural Blackfoot dialect. "Let the squaw remember that she is the promised wife of a chief, and leave other men alone. I have spoken."

He had indeed, and the impetuous, undisciplined girl found she had met her fate. Perhaps it suited her wild nature better than another, for Indians never take kindly to Christian practices. Any way, she bowed herself at the feet of White Thunder, and humbly kissed his hand. She had accepted her fate.

The angry chief turned to Darling, but before he could speak, there was a clatter of steps on the stone corridor, and loud voices. Dick Darling started round in delight, crying, as he heard one voice that he knew:

"Thank God! Safe at last!"

"Whar is he? Whar's the old ring-tailed galoot?" bellowed the voice of Jack Hardin. "I know'd the squaws didn't lie when they said he war hidden hyar, and ef I don't have him aout in short order, nun or no nun, darn me fur a skunk. Hyar he is, by gosh!"

And the station-master rushed into the room, followed by a crowd of rough miners, yelling:

"I know'd I'd find him among the gals, the luxuriant cuss! Why, Dick Darling, you ornary, old, long-legged galoot, how are ye?"

That night Padre Junipero married Dick Darling to Francesca de Ribera, and Jack Hardin stood by, with Colonel Sam Jones, for witnesses. The confessor received a fee enough to settle the consciences of fifty ministers. Dick left the Pony Route and went to Santa Barbara, quite satisfied that for his wounds he had obtained for a wife the most beautiful heiress in California.

White Thunder and his beautiful wives disappeared. Some day we may see more of them. That day was the last time any of them ever saw DICK DARLING.

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